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Cast

This is just to give you a general idea of how I picture the characters. These are character aesthetics, so they don't necessarily look exactly like their picture, but it's the closest I could find. Feel free to picture them how you like!

If you don't want to see how I picture them, skip to the next chapter.

Elijah Ellis

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Fox Ridley

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Josh

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Ryan

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Ian

**

Jude

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Alex

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Liam

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Trevor

**

Nadia

**

Lexa

**

Claudia

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Johnny

**

Austin

**

Holly

01

I had always known, somewhere deep down, that I was different. My mother had always insisted that I wasn't, that she had raised me perfectly as her little church boy that could do no wrong. She raised me as if I was her puppet, pulling the strings of my life and forcing me to live under her command. She would have continued controlling me too, if I hadn't told her I was gay.

That was all it took for me to be thrown out and sent to live with my father and his family, not that I minded too much. I was never too close with my father, only seeing him on some weekends, but he was never harsh to me.

When I called him to tell him that Mom had thrown me out of the house, he immediately rushed over to take me to his place. A month later, my mother had given up custody of me and fully gave it to my father and I was to live with him, his wife, her son, and my younger half-sister.

"Elijah?" my father said quietly, tapping on my bedroom door lightly.

"Come in," I called out, sitting at my desk and typing on my laptop.

My father entered the room, but stayed at the doorway, leaning on the frame. He was still dressed in his business-casual attire for work, briefcase in hand as I turned to stare at him expectantly.

"Just wanted to check in and see if you needed any last-minute things before try-outs tomorrow," he informed me kindly.

While my father hadn't been in my life too much after he split with my mom, he was really making up for it when I needed him most. Part of me couldn't even blame him for his absence in my life because I was sure my mother had everything to do with keeping him away.

"I should be good," I answered casually. "I went back to Mom's to grab all my hockey stuff when she wasn't home."

Dad nodded. "Okay, just let me know if you need anything. I'm sure Joshua has some things you can borrow if you need to."

"Okay," I said with a nod. "Thanks Dad."

"Dinner will be ready in ten," he said before shutting my door tightly to presumably go change out of his work clothes.

After he left the room, I shut my laptop and stood up from my desk to head downstairs. When I got in the kitchen, my stepmother, Mindy, and little sister, Ava, were setting the table.

"Need any help?" I asked.

Mindy smiled kindly at me. "Sure, Elijah."

I took Mindy's spot next to Ava to set the table while she went over to the stove to take dinner out of the oven. Dad came down shortly after and helped Mindy finish off the food. The four of us sat down, an empty spot beside me.

"Should we wait on Josh?" Dad asked Mindy as she stared over at the empty place in annoyance.

"No, I-"

Mindy was cut off by the kitchen door opening and Josh storming into the house quickly, looking distressed.

"Joshua, I told you to be home before dinner," Mindy told him sternly.

"I know, I'm sorry," Josh apologized, rushing over to her to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I lost track of time."

Josh hastily washed his hands at the kitchen sink before plopping down beside me and filling his plate. Josh and I never really said much to each other. He drove me to and from school and the two of us shared small talk, but that was pretty much it. I wasn't entirely sure he wasn't a homophobe, but he never gave me any trouble so I just chose to let it be.

"Are you boys excited for try-outs tomorrow?" Mindy asked as she cut into her food. I nodded, taking a bite of my own.

Josh looked at me briefly. "It should be fun."

"You'll look out for Elijah, won't you Joshua?" Mindy asked with a pointed look.

Josh cleared his throat. "Of course."

I had to force myself to keep my eyes from rolling to the back of my head. I understood that my father and Mindy wanted to keep me safe, but having my stepbrother look after me was not something I was okay with. I could look after myself and I definitely didn't need a babysitter. However, I didn't say any of that to my father or Mindy, since I knew their worry was coming from a good place.

***

The next morning I threw my heavy hockey bag into Josh's trunk and then quickly scurried over to the passenger's side and slid in. Josh was already in the car, playing rap music on his phone. He didn't say anything as he pulled out of the driveway and headed toward the school. A few moments later, he spoke up.

"You're a defenseman, right?" Josh asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Right," I answered with a nod.

"Good. Our defense was really lacking last season. Coach and Ridley will be watching you," Josh said.

I turned to face him with a quizzical look. "Why Ridley?"

Josh looked at me briefly out of the corner of his eye. "He's captain. I thought you knew that."

Fox Ridley. He had been the reason for my misfortunes and the subject of my dreams for the past two months. That fateful night I shared with him

had sparked the inspiration for me coming out to my mother, and that obviously hadn't turned out too well.

The first day of school had been like a scene out of a movie. It was slow motion as I made eye contact with Fox in the hall and I swore there was wind pushing his hair back and a spotlight shining over him. I remember he pulled me into a janitor's closet in the most cliche way and I thought I was ready for whatever was about to happen next. I clearly was not.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Fox hissed in my face, grasping my shirt tightly in his hands. His eyes were wide and wild, looking straight into mine. Maybe he didn't pull me in here for a quickie like I had hoped.

"I go to school here?" I told him, though it came out more like a confused question.

Fox rolled his eyes, though the distressed look stayed on his face. "Obviously. But why? I thought you were from a few towns over?"

"I moved in with my dad," I explained, trying to create some distance between us, but Fox didn't loosen his grip.

"Great," he spat sarcastically, sending me a look that could kill, his fierce brown eyes filling with fire. "If you tell anyone about what happened between us, I will end you."

I narrowed my eyes at him, shoving his shoulders so he would release me. "Chill, I'm not going to out you."

"As far as everyone in this school is concerned, we don't know each other," Fox asserted sternly, pointing at me. He didn't let me get another word out before he exited the janitor's closet, leaving me stunned and confused.

"I didn't know," I replied through clenched teeth.

My relationship with Fox Ridley was nothing short of strained. I couldn't walk by him without being sent a nasty glare, and whenever we shared any words at all his tone was clipped and rude. It was hard for me not to see

him, considering he was good friends with Josh. Fox and other guys from the team had been over the house numerous times within the month I had been living there, not that I had ever spoken to him or the others.

"I know he seems like a hard-ass," Josh started, "but he has nothing against you."

I wasn't too sure about that, but I didn't say anything about it to Josh. He would only try to convince me otherwise, not knowing that Fox did, in fact, have something against me.

Josh and I didn't speak for the rest of the ride to school. Our rides to school were all similar. We would make small talk at the beginning and then stay silent for the remainder of our time in the car. The conversations we shared were never meaningful, but I didn't mind them. At least Josh wasn't cruel to me.

"See you at try-outs," Josh said as a goodbye as the two of us stepped out of his car. He quickly walked off toward the building where his friends were while I took my time walking through the parking lot.

Everyone at this school was a lot more tolerant than the people at my old Catholic school. After I came out, I was exiled by all of my friends and teammates. I was sure they were glad that I had changed schools so they would never have to be stuck in a locker room with me as they undressed, not that I was remotely attracted to any of my teammates.

There were actually quite a few other gay people at my new school, Pine Valley High School. I wouldn't say I was best friends with any of them, but I had acquainted myself with them since my first day arriving at Pine Valley. Since arriving, no one had been outwardly homophobic toward me, but I could tell by the way barely any straight guys spoke to me and the weird looks they gave me, that the people at this school weren't as tolerant as they seemed on the surface.

"Hey, Elijah!" Trevor, one of said gays, exclaimed as soon as I stepped foot inside the school.

"Hey, Trev," I greeted kindly with a small smile, continuing my walk to my locker as he followed me.

"Good luck at try-outs today, we're going to miss you at GSA," Trevor said sincerely as the two of us stopped at my locker.

Trevor was the president of the Gender-Sexuality Alliance club and was the first person, other than Josh and Fox, that I had met at this school. He practically attached himself to my hip and forced me to join the club, not that I minded much. It was nice to be around other LGBT people since I had never had the chance before. Since hockey was going to be almost every day after school, I wouldn't be able to continue going to the club meetings until after the season was over.

"Thanks," I replied, opening my locker. "I'll miss it there too."

Trevor smiled kindly. "You'll be back in March after you guys win the state championship."

I let out a breathy laugh. "If I even make it on the team."

Trevor touched my shoulder lightly. "You *will* ," he assured me.

It was no secret that the hockey team was the best team this school had, having made it to the championship game last season and winning it two seasons ago. Unfortunately for Pine Valley High, they had lost the championship game last year to my old team over at Holy Trinity Catholic School.

The warning bell rang a few moments later and Trevor took his hand away from my shoulder, taking a step back.

"See you around Elijah," he said, waving goodbye before walking away.

I dragged my feel along the shiny hallway to my English class, a class that I dreaded every day. A few members of GSA were in that class to keep me company, but Fox Ridley and a bunch of the hockey team were also in that class. It wasn't that I had a problem with the hockey team, hopefully they

would be my teammates in a few days, it was the nasty glares that Fox gave me every day. It felt like I was being scrutinized with every move I made.

When I got into the class, I immediately headed for my usual seat without looking up from the floor to see if Fox was already there. He was always there before me, I was sure that today was no different. Two of my GSA acquaintances, Lexa and Nadia, were already seated by the time I got there. They were an on-again, off-again couple and by the way they were looking at each other, I assumed now they were on-again.

"Sup, Elijah?" Nadia greeted, looking away from Lexa briefly.

"Did you do the reading?" Lexa asked before I could return the greeting.

I nodded. "I did."

"Can you show us the notes you took?" Lexa asked desperately. "Nadia and I didn't get around to it last night. We were... busy."

I didn't want to have to hear any details about their night together, so I wordlessly handed Lexa my notebook and the two of them began reading the page together.

I stared down at my empty desk, feeling the heat of eyes burning holes in the back of my head. I willed myself to keep my head down, but I was not strong enough as I picked my head up and turned to the face of my torment. Fox Ridley's glare was piercing and intimidating. It was like with one look he could stop my breath and keep me quiet for as long as he wanted. Maybe that was what he was aiming to do.

***

Walking into the locker room at the rink was a surreal experience. After heading out to Josh's car to get our things, the two of us walked side-by-side into the rink on the other side of the school's parking lot where other hockey hopefuls stood around chatting as they got dressed into their gear.

I mindlessly followed Josh, keeping my head down as I got stares from everyone in the room. It didn't occur to me that Josh would be making his way toward Fox and his other friends, but at that point it didn't matter to me. Josh was the only one I knew and sticking with him would keep me from getting harassed.

When the two of us arrived at Josh's group of friends, all of their eyes turned to me. Fox's remained emotionless as if he didn't even know me which I assumed was better than his usual glare. The first one to greet me was a tall male with a bright smile. He was wearing a light top, which complemented his dark skin, and he held his practice jersey in his hand as if he was getting ready to change.

"Hey, I'm Ryan. You must be Elijah," he greeted me cheerfully with a wide smile, extending his hand for me to shake. A feeling of welcoming washed over me as I reached out to shake his hand. At least there were two guys on the hockey team that wouldn't give me a hard time, and to be honest that was all the reassurance I needed.

"Nice to meet you," I replied with a smile of my own, shaking his hand. I had seen Ryan and the other guys in the group over the house a few times, but I had never met any of them.

"Guys this is my step-brother, Elijah," Josh introduced me after clearing his throat. "That's Liam and Alex." Josh pointed out the other two boys, not even bothering to introduce me to Fox.

"Hey, man," Alex, the blond boy, said while Liam, the one with jet black hair just nodded at me in acknowledgement.

Fox continued to stare at me with an impassive look that should have made me feel unwelcome, but I didn't let it get to me. He wasn't as scary as he tried to be and I had dealt with much worse since coming out, so I there was no way I was going to let Fox Ridley bother me.

"I'm going to go get ready," I told the guys after a few moments of silence. They all nodded and went to do the same.

Since lockers weren't assigned yet, I just tossed my bag on the floor near a bench and started taking my things out. I quickly got dressed in my gear and pulled on my skates before taking out my stick and helmet from my bag.

Once I was done getting ready, Josh walked over to me and clapped his hand on my shoulder. I turned to him with raised eyebrows.

"Are you ready?" he asked me, nodding his head toward the door.

Ready as I would ever be. No matter how much I played hockey and how much I loved it, I was still quite nervous trying out with a new team. I had been playing with pretty much the same group of guys since I could skate. I knew how they played and I played well with them. We had on-ice chemistry that was hard to replicate. I didn't know if I would ever have that with this team. Instead of voicing my concerns to Josh, I stood straighter and held my head up high.

"Yeah, I'm ready," I said confidently. Josh smiled slightly at me before clapping me on the shoulder again and motioning for me to follow him out of the locker room.

Once I stepped through the door, the cool air hit me, and I felt at home.

**

Thank you so much for reading! Please let me know what you think about the chapter/the characters!

02

As soon as I stepped on the ice, any nerves I had were thrown to the back of my mind as an after-thought. I looked around as other players made their way out to the ice. There appeared to be about fifty guys here and thirty of us would be cut by the end of the week. I would do everything I could so that I was not one of them.

I watched as Fox stepped onto the ice and glided over to where the coach stood, whispering something in his ear. When Fox skated through the crowd, it seemed to part for him like they knew of his importance.

After another minute, Coach blew his whistle and all conversation ceased. We gathered around and waited for him to speak.

"Good afternoon, boys," Coach began. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Coach Silva."

He paused for a moment, looking around at all the hopeful faces, before continuing.

"This is your captain, Fox Ridley," Coach Silva said, motioning to where Fox stood, leaning on his hockey stick. "Let's cut to the chase, boys. I can only keep twenty of you and I already have one," he continued, motioning toward Fox again.

After seeing Fox on the ice, it didn't surprise anymore that he was the captain with his powerful demeanor that could command a room.

"Those who don't make the team will be dropped to Junior Varsity," Coach explained. "With the potential to be pulled up to Varsity if we need you."

I had never played on a Junior Varsity team in my life. I wasn't going to start my senior year of high school.

Coach Silva looked to Fox as if he was waiting for him to say something. Fox stood up straight, no longer using his stick for support.

"Listen up," Fox said in a deep, commanding tone. "Forwards over there," he continued pointing to his right. "Defensemen over there and goal tenders over there." Fox pointed to his left and to the center respectively.

I felt Fox's eyes on me as I gracefully glided to the left side of the ice with the other defensemen. We briefly made eye contact and he was the first to look away. I wasn't going to let him intimidate me, not if hockey was on the line.

Fox skated over to the forwards while Coach Silva came over to the defensemen and goalies, holding a bag of pinnie jerseys in his right hand.

"After we do some drills, we are scrimmaging." Coach explained, starting to hand out the pinnies. "The color pinnie I give you determines the team you will be on and you're stuck with whatever you get."

I was handed a blue pinnie and let my eyes drift over to the forwards to see what color Josh had gotten. He got red. I didn't need Josh to be on my team, but it would have been nice to be with someone I already knew. My eyes snapped back to Coach as he began speaking again.

"Defense wear the inverse color of their pinnie so if you got blue, you wear the black side, if you got red, you wear the white side," Coach Silva said when he was done handing out the jerseys. "Understand?"

We all gave him verbal confirmation that we understood before he nodded and met Fox over at center ice. The two of them conversed for a few moments before Coach blew his shrill whistle, grabbing everyone's attention.

"We're starting with a skating drill!" he announced. "Blue team take a seat for now, red team line up on the goal line."

I took a seat on the bench and watched as the red team lined up. Coach blew his whistle and everyone skated to the other side of the ice. I looked at

Coach and Fox as the two of them watched the skaters. They were looking at their feet, evaluating their foot work and skating technique. I had done this drill plenty of times to know what was expected of me.

After a few of those, he had the red team line up at the center line and sent two skaters at a time to skate to the blue line and across and then round one of the face-off circles. Again, they looked at the feet to see the footwork of the skaters, this time adding in crossovers, pivots, and backwards skating.

Coach Silva spoke to a few of the guys individually before telling the red and blue teams to switch. I lined up with the rest of the blue team on the goal line and dashed off as soon as I heard Coach's whistle. I kept my feet moving fast when I side stepped to turn the other way, making sure my movements were precise.

We did the same drills he had the red team do, with him and Fox watching us with their scrutinizing gazes. These drills were nothing to me. I would pretty sure I could do these in my sleep, but it was obvious some of the other guys were struggling. When doing skating drills like this, it is easy to see who the skilled skaters are and who aren't. It was all in the technique and it was obvious to see who wasn't using any.

Coach skated over to me as he sent the blue team on a water break after we were done with our skating drills.

"What's your name, son?" he asked, looking at me quizzically with Fox standing right being him, a sullen look on his face.

"Elijah Ellis, sir," I answered respectfully.

Coach nodded. "Good footwork. You must have been skating for a while."

I smiled and nodded. "Since I was three."

"Good job," Coach complimented with a clap on my shoulder. "Keep up the good work."

I thanked him, not bothering to spare Fox a glance, before skating away to get a drink of water. My smile seemed to be permanently etched onto my face for a few moments. Coach didn't single out everyone to tell them they were doing good, but he singled out *me*. Hopefully, that meant good things for my future on this team.

The next drill, Coach called for everyone to be on the ice. He decided we would be doing a shoot and pass drill. Essentially, the drill would consist of three players in the attacking zone, with a goalie in net, skating around cones while also passing the puck to each other and one player shooting the puck. It was a simple drill used for forwards and defensemen to see how each player handles the puck. Coach set the blue team up on one side of the ice and the red team on the other with Fox looking over them.

When it was my turn to do the drill, I made sure my passes were accurate and on the tape of the other player's stick. Eventually it was my turn to shoot and, since I was a defenseman, I shot from the blue line, making sure to keep the puck low. The puck flew into the back of the net, passing the goalie's left pad.

"Good shot, Ellis!" Coach yelled out to me as I made my way to the back of the line. I smiled to myself, my confidence growing pretty much every second. I was in my zone now, and there was no stopping me.

We did a goal scoring drill after that which was also fairly simple. We shot from the blue line and he also had us come up the middle as if on a break-away. I got both of my shots in, my confidence soaring as I saw a look of approval from Coach Silva.

The last drill we did before the scrimmage was a one-on-one drill where a forward was paired with a defenseman. I was paired with Ryan, the boy I met earlier. My job was to keep him from scoring while his job was to get around me and shoot the puck. My golden rule for playing one-on-one was to never play head-to-head. That would give the other player too much freedom to get around me. It was important to give him room on one side so I could force him in the direction I wanted him to go. I was able to take the puck away from Ryan and skate it away from him before Coach blew his whistle for us to stop, giving me a nod of approval.

When it was time for the scrimmage, Coach Silva had each team sit on their respective bench, with Fox coaching the red team along with our assistant coach. Coach Silva assigned the forwards to lines and the defensemen to pairings. I was paired with a boy named Tim, who looked like he was a freshman. I hadn't paid much attention to how anyone else did during tryouts, but I was sure Tim didn't match my playing ability. Coach sent the first line and Tim and I out first for the start of the game. Josh and his friend Alex stood across from each other at the center dot, ready to take the face-off.

Tim and I stood in front of our blue line, ready if the play came our way, with Tim on the left and me on the right. Fox dropped the puck on the center dot and Josh cleanly won the face-off, taking the puck down to our end. I instantly sprang into action, moving to block his way and force him toward the boards. When he saw that I gave him nowhere to go, he sent the puck off in a clever pass to one of this teammates and I went toward the net, prepared to block a shot if I needed to.

The player from the red team went to make a pass, but I was able to intercept it on its way, taking it into the neutral zone. I passed the puck to Alex before we got into the attacking zone and stayed at the right point to keep the puck from leaving the zone. After having to keep the puck in a few times, it was eventually cleared, but we were quick to clear it out of our zone and Coach Silva called for a line change.

The red team ended up winning 3-2, but I wasn't too discouraged by it. I knew I played some great hockey, even scoring one of the goals for my team. I just hoped I would be able to keep it up for the rest of the week.

***

"How were tryouts today boys?" Dad asked as we all sat down at the dinner table. I was in my usual spot beside Josh and across from Mindy.

"Good," I replied blandly, twirling my pasta on my fork before taking a bite.

"Elijah was really good today," Josh added, looking toward Dad. "Even Fox said so."

My eyes went wide at that statement. The same Fox who would only look at me with a glare or a blank expression? The same Fox who pulled me into a closet and threatened me had something nice to say about me? Needless to say, I was shocked.

"He did?" I asked, not even trying to hide my surprise.

Josh nodded, though he didn't elaborate.

"That's great," Dad said with a smile to which Mindy kindly agreed. "It'll be nice to have both of my boys on the same team this year."

"I haven't made the team yet," I reminded him with a pointed look.

"But you will," Mindy assured me, mimicking my tone.

"Trust me," Josh started, taking a sip of his water before continuing, "We are in dire need of good defense and you were the best one out there today. I'm sure your spot is guaranteed at this point."

While that was good to hear, I didn't want to get too far ahead of myself. I knew I was good and had made an impression on Coach Silva, but there were four more days of tryouts and anything could happen. Especially if I did anything to upset Fox Ridley. I wouldn't be surprised if I made one wrong move, Fox would decide I wasn't good enough and convince Coach Silva of it too.

Once dinner was over, I headed up to my room to finish up some homework. After about an hour of that, my phone went off, signaling I had an incoming FaceTime from Trevor. My eyebrows knitted together in confusion before I answered the call.

"Hey!" Trevor greeted me with a wide smile on his face. He looked like he was in bed, sitting against his headboard. His usually gelled and styled hair was in its natural state, which I had never seen it in before.

"What's up?" I asked, not bothering to hide my confusion as to why he was calling me. Trevor and I had only talked outside of school a few times in the

month I had been here. And those times were gatherings with other members of the GSA club, like Lexa and Nadia and a few others.

"Just wanted to see how tryouts went today," he answered casually, the smile never leaving his face. It seemed like Trevor was always smiling. He was definitely the friendliest person I met at Pine Valley.

"Oh," I said, clearing my throat and sitting up on my bed. "They were good."

"Do you think you'll make the team?" Trevor asked, adjusting the position of his phone slightly.

"Josh seems to think so," I told him with a slight laugh, looking at myself in the phone. My hair was a mess due to raking my hands through it and pulling the ends in frustration at my homework. There was a red mark on my cheek from where I had my head resting in my hand. Overall, I looked rough.

"That's good!" Trevor cheered enthusiastically, his eyes widening in excitement. I just nodded in agreement, not knowing what else to say. "There's another reason I wanted to call you," Trevor admitted after my silence.

"Hm?" I hummed.

"A few of us from GSA are getting together at my house Friday night," he told me. "Do you want to come?"

It wasn't the first time Trevor had invited me to a GSA gathering. In fact, he had invited me to one my first week here. I used to think it was just out of obligation to invite the new gay kid, but I wasn't technically in the club anymore, so I was confused as to why he was inviting me now.

"Uh," I started, my confusion evident, "sure. What time?"

"Great! Everyone's coming around seven," he answered happily. "We'll have food and movies and stuff. It'll be fun."

"Yeah, fun," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic, but probably failing.

"Anyway, I gotta go. I'll see you at school tomorrow!" Trevor bid me a goodbye. I sent him a wave before he hung up.

I sighed, tossing my phone down on my bed before turning back to my frustrating math homework.

**

Hello! Thank you for reading.

So, I'm still not sure when I'm going to start updating this regularly, but I figured it was about time I put a new chapter out for you guys.

Please let me know what you think! What did you think of the try outs? Do you like Elijah? What about his family and the coach?

I'll let you know the update day once I decide on it!

03

The next few days of tryouts blurred together and it was finally Friday, the day I would find out if I made the team. Tryouts went well throughout the week. I didn't think I had done anything to hurt my chances for getting on the team, though I did have to suffer through glares from Fox the entire week.

Trevor was standing at my locker by the time I had showed up. He leaned his right shoulder against it, looking down at his phone in his hand.

"What's up?" I asked as I approached him. Trevor instantly looked up from his phone when he heard me.

"Hey, Elijah," he greeted me kindly. "I was just wondering if you needed a ride to my house tonight."

I shrugged, opening my locker. "I can probably get my dad or Josh to drive me."

I saw Trevor nod out of the corner of my eye. "Okay, just let me know if you need me to pick you up. See you at lunch!"

With that, Trevor walked away, greeting people he passed in the hall. Trevor seemed to know everybody at this school, and everyone seemed to like him. He was just one of those people that was impossible to hate.

Soon after, the warning bell rang and I scurried down the hall to my English class. I kept my head down as I found my seat beside Nadia, who was texting on her phone and completely ignoring her pouting girlfriend beside her.

"What are you two fighting about now?" I dared to ask. I wasn't usually interested in their drama at all, but for some reason, I was intrigued.

"Nothing," Nadia replied, not bothering to look up from her phone. "Lex is just being a bitch."

I turned to Lexa to see her roll her eyes, the pout momentarily leaving her face. I raised my eyebrows at her, waiting to hear her side of the story.

"She's mad at me because she asked for my opinion on a dress she wanted to buy, and I told her it made her look frumpy," Lexa explained, her eyes traveling to her girlfriend as she spoke.

"Frumpy?" I asked confusedly. What the hell was frumpy?

"It was too baggy! It didn't show off her body! I was being *honest* ," Lexa defended herself, placing a hand on her chest. Nadia just ignored her, continuing to stare down at her phone.

Instead of worsening the situation, I decided to pull out my notebook and pencil for English and leave the two girls alone to deal with their problem. Nadia would be over it by lunch time. The two of them fought about unimportant things so often, I grew accustomed to how their fights tended to pan out.

With about twenty minutes left in class, our teacher had us start doing our homework and even allowing us to work in groups. However, I wasn't excited to be working in a group with Nadia and Lexa while they weren't getting along. I hoped I would be able to just work by myself.

"Hey, Ellis!" a voice from behind me called out. I turned to look and see that the voice was Ryan, who was sitting with some other guys from the hockey team, including Fox Ridley.

Fox's glare was set on Ryan as he waved me over to their group. I looked over at Nadia and Lexa and the three of us shared confused expressions.

"I won't get mad at you for leaving us if you send me a picture of the homework later," Nadia told me and that was enough for me to get up and head to the back of the classroom where I was being summoned. Anything

was better than dealing with the feuding girlfriends, even being glared at by Fox.

Ryan stood up and pulled a chair for me and placed it beside him. I thanked him and sat down, feeling the stares of the rest of the group.

"I figured since we're teammates now, we should get to know each other," Ryan said, though he seemed to be addressing the whole group.

"I don't even know if I'm on the team yet," I replied, looking across the desk at Fox who was leaning back in his seat with his arms crossed on his chest, looking at me through hooded eyes.

Even though he was looking at me like he wanted me to evaporate into thin air, I couldn't take my eyes off of him for a moment. Fox was insanely handsome, and he knew it. That was why I hooked up with him over the summer. His brown hair was tastefully messy on top of his head, complemented by his tan skin. He wore a charcoal grey champion crew neck with the sleeves rolled up his forearms. Fox's face was void of any noticeable blemishes and his eyelashes were long enough for any girl to be jealous of them.

That man was all sorts of good looking, and I hated him for it.

"Coach put the final roster on his door this morning. You didn't see it?" Ryan said, tearing me from my thoughts and causing my gaze to travel to him.

"Oh, no I didn't," I answered in a surprised voice. I tried my best to hide my excitement, but I couldn't tell how well it worked. It felt good to not have to worry about making the team anymore. I guess Fox didn't hate me enough to keep me off the team.

Ryan introduced me to the other guys in the group, Ian and Jude, who were also on the hockey team. Ian barely spared me a glance, but Jude was about as friendly as Ryan. I found out that Ian was another defenseman on the team.

Great , I thought. The guy seemed to hate me as much as Fox did and there was a possibility he would be my defensive partner on the ice.

"You got plans tonight, Elijah?" Jude asked me, nudging my arm with his elbow.

"You should come hang out with us tonight," Ryan added to which Fox sent him daggers. Fox hadn't said a word since I sat down.

"I have plans," I said, looking straight at Fox. His eyes immediately softened when he heard me and he turned his gaze to me.

"You're already so popular," Jude joked with a laugh. "What're you doin'?"

At first I didn't know if I should tell him the truth. My sexuality was obviously more accepted here than it was at Holy Trinity, but these were *jocks* . Jocks always had something to say about gay people. They definitely knew I was gay, but I didn't know if it was such a good idea to bring attention to it, especially around Fox. When I looked to Fox to see his glare transfixed on me, I decided I didn't care. I was done hiding who I was.

"I'm hangin' with some of the GSA kids at Trevor's," I answered, turning to face Jude.

"Nice," Jude replied. "Trevor's a cool guy." It didn't surprise me that he had something nice to say about Trevor. I was sure everyone did.

"He saved my ass in chemistry last year," Ryan said with a laugh. "I was failing and he offered to tutor me. I passed with a B."

"You'll have to hang with us some other time then," Jude said to me.

I nodded in agreement. "Sure."

Soon after, the bell signaling the end of class sounded. The five of us immediately packed up our things and headed toward the classroom door.

"See you at practice, Ellis," Ryan said with a wave, walking off with Fox.

By the time lunch rolled around, Nadia and Lexa were obviously done with their fight considering the two of them were making out at the table. I wanted to look away from them, but for some reason my eyes stayed glued to the girls, watching them with a look of disgust and hoping for the rest of the group to get to the table so I wouldn't be left alone with them.

"They done fighting?" Trevor asked as he made his way to the table and sat down across from me, his friend, Johnny, sitting beside him.

"Guess so," I mumbled, looking away from the girls to face Trevor.

Ryan, Jude, and few other guys from the hockey team walked by our table as I turned to look at Trevor. Ryan and Jude greeted me with a wave to which I returned before they made their way to their table where Fox and Josh were already sitting with a few girls.

"The hockey team treating you well?" Trevor asked, taking his sandwich out of his lunchbox. Trevor always brought his lunch with him, arguing that school lunch was disgusting.

I nodded. "They didn't really pay much attention to me until I was officially on the roster."

"You made the team?" Trevor asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, I just found out in first period," I explained.

"Congratulations!" Trevor exclaimed, causing Nadia and Lexa to break apart. The girls glared at Trevor, though he paid them no mind, before returning to their previous activity.

"Thanks," I said, shaking my head at the girls.

I couldn't help but let my eyes wander over to the table where the hockey players sat. They seemed like a group of tight-knit friends that had been playing together for years, just like I had been with my old team. I didn't know if I would ever be able to fit in with them.

As I stared, Fox turned away from the girl beside him and looked up, meeting my eyes. We stared at each other for a few moments as if challenging the other to look away. Fox seemed to have mastered the art of staring because he won the battle. I looked down at the table and then back up at him in time to see a slight smirk on his face before he turned away, back to the girl he was talking to before.

***

After a tiring first official hockey practice, I went home with Josh and hopped in the shower. When I was done washing off, I dried and got dressed, looking at the clock to realize it was just about seven.

I bounded down the steps and met my dad in the living room where he was watching the news by himself.

"Dad, can you give me a ride?" I asked, walking from the steps to stand beside the couch.

Dad looked up at me from where he sat, remote in hand. "Where are you going?"

"Trevor's," I answered just as Josh made his way down the stairs.

"Trevor?" Dad asked. "Are you uh... are you *with* this boy?"

My eyes widened at the words that came out of his mouth and I even heard Josh chuckle slightly as he walked behind me toward the door.

"Dad!" I yelled. "Oh my God... No!"

"It's okay if you are!" Dad said quickly. "I just want you to be safe."

"Oh my God," I muttered, rubbing my hand down my face.

Josh laughed again from the doorway. "I can give you a ride."

I immediately looked to Josh, sending him a look of thanks, before turning back to my dad.

"I promise you I am not *with* anyone," I told him seriously. "I'm going to go now and forget this ever happened."

"I'm just looking out for you, Elijah!" Dad yelled after me as Josh and I left through the front door.

I shook my head and let out a heavy sigh as I walked behind Josh to his car. The two of us were silent for a few minutes before Josh decided to speak up.

"So..." he started. "You and Trevor?"

I groaned loudly, throwing my head back while Josh let out a loud laugh.

"I think he likes you," Josh told me with a smirk on his face. "I've seen the looks he gives you."

"No," I said in an annoyed tone.

Josh scoffed. "What do you mean 'no'?"

"He doesn't like me like that," I said, shooting Josh a glare.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Because he only talks to me because I'm new and gay," I told him as if stating the obvious.

Josh smiled, shaking his head playfully. "Whatever. Don't make plans for tomorrow. We're going out with some of the guys from the team."

"We are?" I asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

Josh nodded. "Ryan's idea. I've learned to stop questioning him and just go with what he says."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Josh shrugged. "Probably going to get food and then hang out at Ryan's. Dude's got a killer finished basement."

Part of me wanted to bail on Josh and the team, knowing I would feel out of place there. However, I knew I would only continue to feel out of place on the team if I didn't at least try to befriend them. Ryan and Jude were nice, but if I never accepted their invitations, they would probably stop talking to me.

Soon after, Josh pulled up to the curb in front of Trevor's house.

"Let me know if you need a ride home," Josh said as I opened the door to leave. "Unless you're staying the night..."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not, I'll call you."

I slowly made my way up to the house before reaching the front door. Before I could even knock, the door swung open, revealing an annoyed looking Nadia.

"Thank God you're here," Nadia said, pulling me by my arm into the house.

I could only imagine what had Nadia upset this time.

"Why?" I asked slowly, hoping the reason wouldn't be that her and Lexa were fighting *again* . I didn't feel like dealing with that tonight.

"Johnny is getting on my last nerve," she answered through gritted teeth.

I knew that Johnny and Nadia didn't really get along. I had found that out pretty early on. It seemed as though everything Johnny did annoyed her.

"What'd he do?" I mumbled as Nadia dragged me through the house, into the den.

"Just being his know-it-all self, like always," she said in a low tone.

When the two of us entered the den, I saw Trevor, Johnny, Lexa, and a few other kids from GSA lounging around and talking animatedly with each

other.

"Elijah's here," Nadia announced, causing everyone to turn toward us.

"I thought you were getting us drinks?" Lexa asked her.

"I was, but Elijah was at the door," she answered, going to sit by her girlfriend.

"Elijah," Trevor greeted with a smile, waving me over. "Come sit."

I obliged, walking over to sit beside him and Johnny, along with another GSA kid named Austin.

"What's up?" Austin asked kindly, taking a sip of his water.

"Elijah made the hockey team," Trevor answered for me with a wide smile.

Austin gave me an impressed look. "Wow, congrats man."

"Thanks," I replied with a small, awkward smile.

"Lucky you getting to see the hockey boys all hot and sweaty," Austin teased, a devilish smirk on his face.

My face flushed, looking toward Trevor to see that he was shooting Austin a scowl and shaking his head.

"I guess," I said awkwardly.

"Come on," Austin continued. "You can't tell me you don't find any of them attractive. Not even Fox?"

I scoffed. "I'm not blind."

Austin let out a loud laugh at my words, slapping me on the shoulder and giving me a look of approval.

"I'm more into your brother, myself," Austin admitted jokingly.

I gave him a strange look. "Josh isn't my actual brother."

Austin shrugged. "He's hot."

I decided not to comment on that. Josh had been my step-brother for so long, I could never look at him in that way.

"Anyway," Trevor cut in, causing Austin and I to look at him. "We were just about to put in a movie. Do you have any requests, Elijah?"

I shrugged, shaking my head. "I'm good with whatever."

"We want a lesbian movie!" I heard Lexa exclaim from the other side of the room. The girl beside her, Holly, nodded in agreement.

"I agree with Lex," Nadia said, sitting down on her girlfriend's lap.

Trevor tossed them the remote. "Then you pick it."

Nadia caught the remote with ease, giving Trevor an arrogant expression, before using the remote to navigate Netflix on his TV.

The night hadn't been as awkward as I anticipated. We watched a movie that Nadia had picked out on Netflix and made joking commentary throughout it. Overall, it was a good night, though I still didn't know if I could ever see myself fully fitting in with this crowd.

**

Okay, welcome to On Thin Ice! Thank you for reading.

Please let me know what you think about the characters so far! Who do you think you'll end up liking? End up hating?

So, I've decided that with my new school schedule, it will be best for me to update on Fridays. Sometimes this won't be possible. I have a lot more work this semester than I anticipated, so I'm just hoping as the semester progresses I will get into a routine and get all of my school

work done by Thursday so I can update here on Friday. So *please* bear with me.

04

Before I came out, going out with my hockey team was an every weekend occurrence. We would spend Friday and Saturday night together and then go out together again after church on Sundays. At the time it was great, since they were all my close friends, but once I was cast out I didn't know if I would ever feel that sense of belonging again.

Sitting in the burger shop with my new hockey team wasn't exactly a comfortable experience. These guys had been friends since they had been on the team together, and all of a sudden and new comer was intruding on their get together.

I was that new comer. And I definitely felt like an outcast.

Ryan and Jude did their best to help me feel included, but I was practically being ignored by the rest of them. Part of me wondered if Fox told them to keep away from me. That would explain why his friend, Ian, was already being so cold to me without even knowing me. Either that, or he was a homophobe.

"So Elijah," Ryan started as I took a sip of my shake. All eyes were on me for the first time this afternoon and I didn't know whether I was happy with the attention, or if it made me want to crawl in a hole and die.

"How was your night with Trevor?" Ryan asked suggestively, moving his eyebrows.

My face heat up as I hear Josh chuckle from beside me. I didn't dare look at Fox, knowing there was a scowl being directed at me.

"It was, uh, it was fine," I stammered, looking down at my plate.

"Just fine?" Jude asked smugly, sharing a look with Ryan.

I nodded, not knowing what else to say. Quite frankly, I didn't want to say anything else at all.

"I'm confused," Alex stated with his mouth full of veggie burger. "Are you and Trevor goin' out or somethin'?"

I groaned aloud to which Josh started laughing at my expense along with Ryan and Jude. Alex continued looking as confused as ever, looking to Ian and Fox as if they would explain the situation to him.

"We're just messing with you, Ellis," Ryan laughed, shaking his head playfully. "Lighten up a bit."

I sent him a closed lip smile and looked back down at my plate. I knew I should take Ryan's advice and lighten up a bit, but I couldn't help but struggle with feeling like I didn't belong anywhere at my new school. Not only did I feel out of place with the GSA kids, but I felt like an outsider on my own hockey team. My team was supposed to be my family, but it felt as though I connected with no one at this school, despite being welcomed by quite a few people.

"I'm still confused," Alex interjected, his face looking lost.

I looked over to Fox and noticed him roll his eyes out of annoyance before taking a small sip of his shake in front of him.

"You're an idiot," Fox told Alex pointedly.

Alex just waved him off and took a bite of his veggie burger, completely unbothered by Fox's insult.

"You ready for real practice to start next week, Ellis?" Jude asked, changing the subject, which I was grateful for.

I nodded. "I'm sure I'll manage."

My response elicited a scoff from Fox and I shot him an offended look. Surely he wouldn't have let me on the team if he thought I couldn't handle

it, but at this moment he was acting as if he knew I couldn't. Maybe he was just hoping I would fail.

"What?" I asked, directing my offense at Fox. "You think I can't handle it?"

Fox looked surprised that I had called him out, but he quickly recovered and sent me a cold look with his eyes dark and stormy, void of any recognizable emotion.

"I think you're about to see just how hard it's going to be," he told me in an arrogant tone. "It's not the same as prep school hockey, Ellis."

I rolled my eyes at that. He obviously had no idea what "prep school" hockey entailed. I was sure it was just as difficult as any other highly competitive team. This team would be no different and I would prove Fox wrong. He thought so low of me, but I wouldn't let him think lowly of my skills on the ice. That was what I took most pride in about myself.

"I'm sure he'll be fine, Fox," Josh defended me, shrugging toward his friend, though Fox never took his eyes off of me.

The two of us were caught in a stare down, making it obvious that there was some bad blood between us. If the other guys didn't know we didn't like each other before, they sure knew about it now. I could practically feel Josh's eyes burning holes in the side of my face, wondering what exactly was going on with Fox and me.

I was the first to look away, cursing myself as I glanced down at my plate once again. When I briefly looked back up, I saw Fox with a snide smirk on his face as if he had just won a game. I suppose he had, if he considered our brief argument a game.

"It'll be all good," Ryan agreed with Josh, looking between Fox and I. "Kid's got mad skills, I know you saw it, Fox."

I couldn't help but send a snide smirk of my own toward Fox while he fumed quietly in his seat. As long as I had a few guys on the team on my

side, Fox wouldn't be able to get to me. At least someone thought good enough of me to compliment me on my hockey skills.

"Whatever," Fox finally responded after sharing his glare with Ryan. "I'm just saying, don't think it's going to be all fun and games. We're serious about winning this year. Don't make me regret putting you on the team."

The look on Fox's face as he spoke to me in a condescending irritated me beyond belief. He thought he was so much better than I was, but the truth was, the two of us were more similar than either of us would be proud to admit.

"I think you're forgetting that *I* won last year," I shot back in an angry tone. "As in, I beat you. I have that championship ring and you don't."

The guys all looked at me with shocked expressions, even Fox for a few moments before his normal, stoic face was back in order. He crossed his arms over his chest, raising his eyebrows at me. I couldn't tell if he was impressed that I had held my own against him, or if he was plotting some way to sabotage me. Either way, I mirrored his expression and the two of us were stuck in a stare off once again.

"He kinda got you there, bro," Ian spoke up for the first time, nudging Fox with his elbow.

"Here's to hoping you play like a champion then," Fox replied with an almost sinister expression.

Without letting my strong front falter, I replied, "I do."

Before any other words could be said, I let my eyes trail past Fox and toward the door of the burger shop. The last people I ever wanted to see came into my vision and I instantly pressed my head to the table, hoping to shield myself from them.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Fox asked, turning around to try and figure out what I had seen.

I didn't say anything as all of the guys followed Fox's eyes and looked toward the front of the shop at my old teammates. I was sure they would be able to put two and two together to figure out who they were.

"You think we could hurry up and get out of here?" I asked desperately, keeping my head down.

Fox nodded and the other guys followed, not even hesitating. I was grateful that none of them had asked questions about my sudden wish for departure. Ryan and Josh even walked beside me to keep me shielded as we made our way out of the shop, being sure I wouldn't be spotted.

I didn't feel secure until I was in Josh's car and he had pulled out of the parking lot of the burger shop. He didn't say anything as he drove behind Fox to get to Ryan's house, and for that I was thankful. I didn't have anything to say about my old teammates, and there was no use rehashing old wounds. They were nothing to me, but competitors, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Josh messed with the radio a bit when we were stopped at a traffic light, but still didn't say anything. I could tell he was curious, but Josh was perceptive enough to know how I felt about the situation. He knew I didn't want to talk about it, and therefore, he wouldn't say anything. Not that Josh would say anything even if I did want to talk about it. We had been stepbrothers for years, but we were never close enough to have a heart-to-heart and I didn't want to start that now.

Soon enough, we pulled up to what I could only assume was Ryan's house. The house was big, bigger than any I had seen around here, but not as big as the houses of my old friends. Most of the Catholic School kids, especially the ones on the hockey team, were children of rich parents, meaning they basically lived in mansions.

Although it wasn't a mansion, Ryan's house was nice. It was an eggshell color with a porch that wrapped around. It appeared to have a nice, well kept yard and the driveway was big enough for about ten cars.

"This is Ryan's place?" I asked Josh as we stepped out of his car onto the driveway.

Josh nodded. "His dad's a contractor, he built it."

I didn't say anything else as we walked toward the house behind the rest of the guys. Again, I felt oddly out of place. This was the place they hung out together on the weekends and here I was, intruding on their time together. Part of me felt like I should have just stuck with the GSA kids, but I knew I needed to have some type of relationship with my team if we even had a chance of playing well together on the ice.

When we got inside, I followed Josh along with the rest of the guys through the hallway, into the kitchen, and to a set of descending stairs that I assumed led to the basement. Josh wasn't kidding when he told me that Ryan had a killer finished basement. There was a giant flat screen TV hanging on the wall in front of a large, leather sectional. Beyond that, there was a pool table, an air hockey table, and a foosball table over in an open area of the basement. Tall glass doors led out to a stone patio with a fire pit and in ground pool. Needless to say, I was impressed.

"So, Ellis," Ryan started, walking closer to me, "This is where the magic happens."

Alex let out a disgusted scoff. "You're makin' it sound like we have gay orgies down here."

Ryan shot him a dirty look and Alex's eyes immediately widened as he looked over at me with a panicked expression.

"Not that there's anything wrong with gay!" he exclaimed quickly. "We just definitely don't do gay orgies down here."

I laughed at his words and shook my head playfully.

"Yeah, so don't get your hopes up, Ellis," Ian muttered, walking past me to take a seat on the sectional.

I just ignored him. Ian, along with Fox, was someone I decided I would never get to like me, so I wasn't even going to try. He wasn't worth the energy.

Alex scoffed aloud at Ian. "Please, he wouldn't want to have a gay orgy if *you* were involved. *I'm* obviously the most attractive one to gay guys. Right Elijah?"

Alex looked at me expectantly along with the rest of the guys and I had no idea what to say. It wasn't that Alex was unattractive, but I had a feeling if I said that he was, I would only be giving more ammunition to Ian to try and insult me with.

"Alex, stop," Josh said after looking at me briefly. I must have looked uncomfortable because that was definitely how I felt at that moment.

"He can't get girls to call him attractive so he's trying the other team," Ian snickered, elbowing Fox to get him to laugh along. Fox let out one forced laugh before pulling a straight face and looking over at me.

"You can't get called attractive by either," Alex shot back.

"Apparently neither can you," Ian retorted, crossing his arms over his chest.

Fox rolled his eyes and made his way over to the couches in front of the TV. Josh was soon to follow and I trailer behind him like a lost puppy. At that point, I would do anything to get away from the awkward conversation between Alex and Ian.

Ryan and Jude also left the other two to bicker by the stairs and joined the rest of us at the couches. Ryan picked up the remote for the TV and began scrolling through his Netflix to find something to watch.

"You watch *Queer Eye* ?" I asked him quizzically after seeing it in his recently watched section.

"I was watching it with my sister," he explained with a smile. "She loves it. Jonathan is her favorite."

My mood instantly brightened. "I love Jonathan."

"I'm more of a Karamo guy," Ryan admitted with a shrug. "He's cool but he's also one handsome dude."

I laughed. "He is."

"Put on *Big Mouth* ," Ian interrupted, sitting beside me on the couch.

Ryan rolled his eyes but complied anyway and no one objected. I had never seen the show, but I found it hard to even pay attention to it so I didn't. Instead of watching with the rest of the guys, I pulled out my phone to see that I had a text from Trevor.

Hope your day with the team is going well :)

I never understood where I stood with Trevor. Most of the time I felt as though he only talked to me because he was being nice, but then sometimes he would go out of his way to speak to me and that confused me. He was never necessarily flirty with me, but Josh and my dad seemed to think that he had a crush on me or something. I felt as the the two of us were in this sort of in-between friendship that didn't seem like it was going to amount to anything more than that.

I decided I should reply to him, considering I was bored out of my mind.

It's goin good

His reply was almost instant.

I'm glad! I hope they're making you feel included

I pondered on that for a moment. The only reason I didn't feel included was because of my own insecurities, not because the hockey guys were doing anything to exclude me. I couldn't blame them for that, it was my own fault.

They are mostly. still feel a little out of place

That'll get better with time :)

Ya, i'm sure it will

I spent the rest of the night casually texting back and forth with Trevor until Josh decided he was ready to head home. When we bid goodbye to the rest of the guys, I let my eyes linger on Fox for an extra second. He stared back, but this time it wasn't a look of hatred.

I couldn't tell what it was, but it was an improvement and I would take what I could get.

**

Hello everyone! Thank you for reading. And thank you for 10k reads!

I decided to update a day early because I decided to write instead of doing my school work lmao. Also, I'm trying to get the reads up on this so there might be an update sooner than next Friday so look out for that.

What do you think about the group of hockey guys? Who's your favorite of the group besides Elijah?

Comment! Vote! Let me know what you think!

05

My father was never as religious as my mother was. Back when I lived with my mother, Sundays revolved around church, but now that I was living with my father, things were different. Instead of going to church in the morning, Dad made breakfast with Mindy while the two of them danced around the kitchen listening to music. They did it every week and I grew fond of their small tradition, especially since I got to eat whatever they ended up making.

I rolled over in my bed, inhaling a deep breath and getting a whiff of the prominent smell of bacon that filled the house. The music coming from downstairs was faint, but I could tell it was Fleetwood Mac. They were Dad and Mindy's favorite band and I knew that was what had to be playing.

Within the next few moments, twelve-year-old Ava barged into my room looking more annoyed than usual.

"Breakfast is ready," Ava grumbled, not leaving her spot from my doorway.

"What's up with you?" I asked, sitting up on the bed and letting my comforter slide down my bare chest.

"I got my period," she told me angrily with a huff.

"Oh," I replied awkwardly, clearing my throat. "Um, congrats?"

Ava let out a heavy, frustrated sigh. "All boys are clueless."

At least she knew that already.

"So," I started, standing up from the bed to pull a shirt over my head, "did you tell your mom?"

Ava rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning her shoulder on the door frame.

"Yes, I told her," Ava replied blandly. "And she practically wants to throw a party."

I laughed, walking toward Ava at the door. She moved to the side so I could get out and let me close my door. The two of us made our way toward the stairs to get to the kitchen.

"You're her only daughter, everything you do is going to excite her," I consoled with a smile.

Ava gave me a wicked smirk. "I guess that means I should rebel."

I chuckled, but shook my head at her. Ava was only my half sister, but it felt as though she was my full sibling. She was witty and mature for her age and just cool all around. I loved having her as a little sister.

When we got down to the kitchen, Josh was already there, munching on an egg sandwich and bobbing his head to the music while Dad and Mindy sang along to "Go Your Own Way" loudly. Ava and I grabbed plates and piled them full of food, getting greeted with loving kisses on cheeks and hugs from our parents, before joining Josh at the kitchen table.

"Elijah, did you hear?" Mindy asked, turning down the music and heading over to the table. "My baby is a woman now!"

Mindy placed her hands on Ava's shoulders while Ava's faced turned into a hard scowl directed my way, as if I was the cause of her mother's overbearing action.

"Um, what?" Josh asked awkwardly, looking between Ava and me.

Mindy looked excitedly at her son. "Ava got her—"

"Mother!" Ava exclaimed, whipping her head around to face her. "Enough."

Mindy gave her daughter a loving, apologetic look, rubbing her shoulders gently.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Mindy apologized, "I'm just so excited for you."

"Why would you be excited for me to bleed out of my vagina for a week every month?" Ava asked in an annoyed tone while Dad took a seat at the table with his plate.

" *Oh* ," Josh finally said. "I get it now."

I rolled my eyes, plopping a piece of bacon into my mouth. "You're slow," I told him.

Josh just shrugged and continued eating his breakfast, completely unfazed by the news about our sister's newfound "womanhood."

"You boys have plans today?" Dad asked, setting down his coffee after taking a sip.

Josh shook his head while I replied, "I don't."

Dad smiled widely. "Wonderful. Let's do something."

"You're going to leave me alone with her?" Ava asked, pointing her thumb at Mindy.

Dad chuckled, turning toward his daughter. "You'll survive. I'm sure of it."

Ava muttered, "I wouldn't be so sure."

"Anyway, boys," Dad addressed Josh and I, "I was thinking we could go to the store and get some things you'll need for hockey."

"I need new sticks," Josh told him.

"Perfect," Dad replied. "Will you two be ready in an hour?"

Josh and I both nodded and made our way upstairs once we were done eating our breakfasts. I did my morning routine and got dressed before meeting Josh out in the hallway and heading down the stairs with him. Dad was waiting for us in the living room, sitting on the couch with Mindy and Ava.

"Ready to go?" he asked, standing from the couch.

We nodded and bid the girls a goodbye before heading out to Dad's car. I took the front seat before Josh could get there and I smirked when I heard him curse under his breath.

Dad brought us to the sports store on the other side of town. I had never been in there since I would always go with my old hockey team to get the equipment I needed and they tended to go to the more expensive stores near the mall. Once we were parked, the three of us made our way toward the store together and immediately went to the hockey section.

"What do you need, Elijah?" Dad asked as he looked at some stick tape.

"Some of that," I replied with a grin, pointing toward the tape he was holding. He tossed it in the basket while I grabbed a few more rolls.

Josh was already over at the sticks with one in hand. Dad and I walked over to him as he gripped the stick in his hand tightly.

"Is this the one you want?" Dad asked, motioning toward the stick.

"I'm not sure yet," Josh replied, looking down at the stick. "I'm trying to imagine what it would be like once it's cut."

"Lighter," I joked, grabbing the stick from his hands.

It felt good in my hands and it was already light enough without it being cut. I knew Josh liked to have his sticks cut shorter than average because he found it easier to handle the puck like that, so I was sure once it was cut it would be perfect for him.

Josh grabbed another of the same stick and the three of us moved on to look at some workout clothes. I grabbed a few new dry-fit t-shirts and shorts while Josh did the same. We also got some hockey stick wax for the blades of our sticks before heading toward the checkout area with all of our things.

I stopped in my tracks when we reached the register and my face immediately began to heat up while my throat dried. Standing behind the

register as the cashier was one of my old hookups, Tyler. We had gotten together a few times and had our fun, but I hadn't spoken to him since. Dad didn't seem to notice my discomfort as he waltzed on over to the register and started laying our things down for Tyler to scan.

I kept my head down as I stood behind my father, but I knew that Tyler had noticed me. He kept glancing my way, like he wanted to say something but knew he shouldn't in front of my dad. Josh seemed to pick up on the awkwardness of the situation and looked between Tyler and I suspiciously.

We couldn't get out of the store soon enough. As soon as Dad paid for everything, I was out the door and at the car in a matter of seconds. Neither him or Josh commented on my sprinting to the car when they made it there a few moments later.

"How about some lunch?" Dad asked once we were all in the car.

"I could go for some food," Josh replied, staring down at his phone in the backseat.

I wasn't necessarily in the mood for lunch, feeling like I had just eaten. Not only that, but my stomach was queasy from the uncomfortable situation that had just taken place a few moments before, but I didn't say anything as Dad drove in the opposite direction of our house to go to a restaurant.

We were seated right away when we got to the restaurant. Josh and I sat on one side of the booth with Dad across from us. Our waiter came over to the table moments after we sat down with a wide, friendly smile on his face.

"Hi, I'm Gabe and I'll be your server today. Can I start you off with something to drink?" Gabe asked kindly, letting his eyes linger on me for an extra second. It didn't take me long to notice the rainbow pin attached to his apron.

My Dad eyed Gabe warily, noticing the boy look at me suggestively. I prayed he wouldn't say anything about it, but knowing my father, he would.

"I'll have an iced tea," Dad answered, snatching Gabe's attention away from me.

Josh and I both answered that we would have water before Gabe gave me one last smile and walked away to get our drinks.

"He was flirting with you," Dad said, wasting no time in bringing up our waiter's behavior.

"What?" I asked quizzically. "No he wasn't."

"It kinda seemed like it, dude," Josh said with a shrug. "Can't take you anywhere, huh?" he joked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dad asked, his eyes wide.

"Noth—"

"You didn't see the cashier giving him the eyes at the sports store?" Josh teased with a smirk, cutting me off.

"He did?" Dad wondered, seeming to be out of the loop.

"No," I said at the same time Josh said, "Yes."

I glared at my stepbrother as Gabe came back with our drinks, his smiling seeming to never have left his face.

"Are you guys ready to order? Need a few more minutes?" he asked kindly.

"I think we need a few more minutes," Dad replied quickly, causing Gabe to tell us he would be back in a few moments when we were ready.

"What happened with the guy at the store?" Dad asked Josh and I as soon as Gabe was out of earshot.

The two of them looked at me expectantly as if waiting for me to start explaining.

"Don't even say 'nothing,'" Josh warned with a knowing look. "I saw him looking you."

I blew out a long, frustrated breath and threw my head back in annoyance. Dad and Josh continued staring at me as if they weren't going to let me get out of telling them what went on with Tyler.

"He was just a guy I used to see," I grumbled, taking a sip of my water and biting down on the straw.

"You dated him?" Dad asked, sounding astonished while Josh just sent a smirk my way.

I shook my head. "Not really date."

I almost died on the spot at the weird tension in the air as my father connected the dots with what I was saying. This was the absolute last thing I wanted to talk to my father about. I would rather us never talk about my sex life together *ever* .

"He means they hooked up, Dan," Josh teased, calling my dad by his name.

Dad grimaced. "I got that, thanks Josh," he replied sarcastically.

Josh chuckled. "I was just making sure you understood."

"Can we stop talking about this now?" I cut in, probably looking as embarrassed as I felt.

Dad and Josh both dropped the conversation and picked up their menus to figure out what they wanted to eat. The rest of lunch went by smoothly. Dad asked Josh and I about hockey and school and we talked to him about what was going on in our lives. It was much less disconcerting than the conversation we had earlier. When we finished our food, Dad ordered some take out for Mindy and Ava, knowing the two of them would be angry if he didn't.

"So, the hockey team is treating you well, Elijah?" Dad asked, sipping on his iced tea.

I swallowed the water in my mouth before answering, "I think they're still adjusting to me, but it's going fine."

Dad nodded in understanding. "Just let me know if anyone gives you any trouble. I want you to be safe here."

"Coach Silva and Ridley won't allow any bullying," Josh interjected, reassuring my father. "And I won't either."

"That Ridley is a good kid, huh?" Dad wondered, looking between Josh and I.

I let out a sarcastic, humorless laugh, causing the two of them to look at me. I quickly changed my expression to appear to be more sincere than I felt.

"He's alright," I told them with a shrug.

"He can be kinda uptight sometimes," Josh agreed with a nod. "But he's a good guy, you just have to get to know him.

If only Josh knew exactly how much I knew Fox Ridley.

Soon enough Gabe came back to our table with the take out and the three of us got up to leave. As we were exiting the building, Josh nudged me in the ribs with his elbow.

"You should go talk to him," he whispered so my dad couldn't hear. The two of us looked back to see Gabe watching us as we left. He looked away as soon as we made eye contact.

I shook my head and continued walking forward. It wasn't that Gabe was unattractive, in fact, it was quite the opposite. He wasn't necessarily my type, but he was cute enough to interest me, I just didn't want to get caught up in anything now. At the moment, I was focused on hockey and school and that was it. The guys on the hockey team were okay with me being gay, but who knew how they would react if I started toting around a new boyfriend. For the moment, I was content being alone and trying to fit in

rather than trying to get into a romantic relationship. I had never had a real boyfriend before and I wasn't entirely sure I was ready for it.

And by the way my father acted today, I was sure he wasn't ready for it either.

**

Okay get this... I had this chapter finished and completely forgot to publish it yesterday and didn't think of it until just now... my bad.

Anyway, what did you think about Elijahs outing with his dad and Josh? And you got an introduction to Ava this chapter. How do you feel about her?

Please let me know what you think!

06

I woke up on Monday morning to my father's voice yelling at someone over the phone. My father wasn't a strict man and I had rarely ever heard him yell, so I couldn't think of anything that would make him raise his voice.

"You gave up that right when you tossed him out like he was nothing!" I heard Dad yell, causing confusion to ripple through me.

I stood up from my bed and tossed a shirt over my head before speedily bounding down the steps. When I entered the kitchen, Josh and Mindy were sitting at the table in silence while my father was in the next room on the phone.

"What's going on?" I asked in whisper, resting my palms down on the table and taking a seat across from Josh and Mindy.

Mindy sent a skeptical look my way as if she knew the answer to my question, but didn't want to tell me.

"Elijah..." she trailed in a motherly tone. "Your father's on the phone with Susan."

Susan. My mother. Right.

I narrowed my eyes and turned toward the room where my father resided. He continued his yelling match on the phone with my mother, seeming to have forgotten there were other people in the house. Less than a second later the yelling stopped, and Dad came fuming into the kitchen. His angry and disgusted face softened as soon as he saw me.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper and you all had to hear that," Dad apologized, seeming to be ashamed by the way he acted. He looked to me for a response along with Josh and Mindy.

"Why'd she call?" I asked, my voice coming out softer than I intended.

Any discussion about my mother was still a sore spot for me. I had lived with her for seventeen years, and believed she truly loved me, yet she shunned me the second I revealed who I truly was. The mere thought of the way I lost my relationship with my mother was enough to send a sharp pang through my heart.

"Let's not talk about that right now," Dad suggested softly, sitting beside me at the table. "You have to get ready for school."

Although I was dying to know what she had to say, I nodded in agreement with my father which caused him to place a comforting hand on my shoulder. I didn't want to argue with him or force him to tell me. I knew he wanted to keep me in the dark to protect my feelings and I appreciated him for it.

No one spoke of my father's yelling for the rest of the morning. Josh and I got ready for school and met each other out in the driveway. We both got in our respective seats and Josh began driving toward school.

"You know I meant to say this to you before," Josh started, "but if you ever need to borrow the car, you can."

I was surprised at Josh's words and turned to face him with my mouth slightly agape in shock.

"But this is your car," I tried reasoning.

"It's technically Dan's and you're his son, so..." Josh trailed, looking at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road.

"Well, thanks," I replied awkwardly, scratching the back of my neck. "But I doubt I'll ever need to borrow it. I don't really have anywhere to take it."

Josh just shrugged, dropping the matter, and the two of us spent the rest of the ride to school in silence. We shared brief parting words once we made it to school, Josh walking off toward his hockey friends and me walking alone to my locker.

After retrieving my things from my locker, I headed to my first period class a few minutes before the warning bell. The teacher wasn't even in the room when I arrived, but I still scurried to my seat and plopped my earbuds in my ears as I sat down.

I couldn't help but think of what my Mom and Dad had spoken about this morning. It was obviously about me, but I couldn't think of a reason as to why my mother would call to talk about me. It wasn't like she could call me herself. When she kicked me out, she shut off my phone service and my father got me a new phone and number when I moved in. I was grateful for that since now none of my old teammates could cyber harass me.

The warning bell rang and soon after the class began to fill with students. Nadia and Lexa walked in hand in hand and briefly greeted me before taking their seats. Ryan and Jude each gave me a nod of acknowledgement as they walked in behind Fox and Ian and took their usual seats at the back of the class.

No matter how hard I tried, I wasn't able to focus during the English lesson today. I zoned out so bad that *Nadia* of all people had to nudge me to pull me out of my thoughts.

"Rough morning?" Nadia wondered as we walked out of the room at the end of class.

"Kind of," I answered with a shrug.

Lexa pulled Nadia along in the direction of their next class while I turned to head to my own.

I had a feeling I would have troubling focusing for the rest of the day.

***

No matter how unfocused I could be in my academics, nothing kept my attention off of hockey. Since today was our first real practice as a team, I knew I still had to impress. I knew Fox would be watching to ensure I was playing "like a champion."

Getting changed in a locker room full of guys never used to faze me, but since coming out, it had been an awkward experience. Usually the straight guys were worried about the gay kid sneaking a look at them as they changed, but from my experience, *I* was the one getting stares. A lot of the guys kept their eyes on me as if they were making sure I wasn't going to watch them. None of the guys on the team had been outwardly homophobic toward me, but I could tell by the wary looks I was receiving that they were uncomfortable around me.

I changed quickly and practically sprinted out of the locker room, being the first one out on the ice. Coach Silva and our assistant coach, Coach Merton, came out onto the ice shortly after I did, followed by Fox a few moments later.

"Afternoon, Ellis," Coach Silva greeted with a nod.

I nodded back. "Good afternoon, sir."

Soon enough, the rest of the team trickled out of the locker room. Once the whole team was present, Coach Silva blew his whistle and motioned for everyone to meet him at center ice. I noticed how none of my teammates stood too close to me, one even went as far as moving away when he saw that I was next to him. I didn't want to let that action sting, but I would be lying if I said it didn't.

Coach Silva spoke animatedly to the team about the season, effectively hyping everyone up. Everyone except me. I found it hard to be happy while we weren't playing hockey. Once practice actually started, I wouldn't let the dismissal of my teammates get to me because while we were playing none of that mattered and I was sure the rest of the guys understood that as well.

Thankfully, we started on drills soon after Coach Silva's speech. I was paired with Ian, like I expected to be, for our defensive drills. I was glad when the two of us appeared to actually work quite well together. At least he wasn't letting his distaste for me affect the way he played.

Throughout practice we did tiresome drills, leaving the entire team huffing and puffing by the end of it. To end practice, Coach Silva broke us off into

two teams for a brief scrimmage. My team included Ian and Josh while Fox, Jude, Ryan, and Alex were on the other team.

Coach Merton was responsible for our team and pulled us over to crowd around him as he formed his two forward lines and defensive pairings.

"Ian and Elijah, you two are paired and you're starting," Coach Merton announced, pointing his pen at us.

The game was underway when Fox and the starting center from our team took the face off at the center dot. Fox cleanly won the puck and passed it over to Jude who was waiting behind him. I sprung into action and barreled over to Jude.

Fox's team was quick to score, but a few moments later, I was able to score for my team from the blue line. Josh came over and patted my shoulder as the two of us made our way to the bench to let our second line have their shift.

When I got back out on the ice, it didn't take long for someone to shove me roughly into the boards as I tried to gain control of the puck. I was hit with so much force that I fell against the boards and Coach Silva obnoxiously blew his high pitched whistle as he quickly skated over to me.

"Are you alright, Ellis?" he asked worriedly, bending over with his hands on his knees.

I groaned, but nodded anyway, getting myself back up onto my skates. The hit rattled me, but it was nothing I couldn't handle. Once Coach Silva saw that I was okay, he turned around to our onlookers with a glare on his face.

"That was boarding, two minute penalty," he said in an authoritative tone, looking straight at the player who hit me.

"It was a clean hit!" he argued with wide eyes.

"It was a hit from behind," Fox interjected with a look of annoyance. "And it was unnecessarily rough. I would give you four minutes in the box if it

were up to me."

I wasn't all that surprised to hear Fox's words. He knew the game well and he wanted it to be played fairly, of course, he was going to be against the hit even if it was done by someone on his team.

The player, number 72, rolled his eyes and started toward the bench, muttering something under his breath.

"Excuse me?" Fox questioned loudly, eliciting a look of confusion from Coach Silva.

"Nothing," Number 72 muttered, looking back at Fox.

"Really? Because I swore I heard you say something about *that fairy* . Or was I just hearing things?" Fox shot back rudely.

I let out a sigh and began skating toward where the rest of the team was near the benches. Fox and the two Coaches looked angrily at Number 72 as he looked down at the ice in shame.

"We will not have that sort of talk on this team," Coach Silva announced seriously.

"Does anyone else have anything they'd like to get out in the open about *that fairy* ?" Fox spat angrily. "This is your only chance. Let's clear the air *now.* "

I didn't want to stand here and listen to any of the bad things people were going to say about me, but I had a feeling that I had no choice. Fox was confrontational and he was going to make people say what they had to say and humiliate them for it so they wouldn't think about saying it again. That was just the way he was.

"Some of us were just thinking," Number 21 began, standing beside 72, "Maybe he should use the girls locker room? No offense, but it might just be better that way. We won't be uncomfortable and neither will he."

I was mortified by his suggestion and looked down at the ice to hide the tint of my embarrassment. Coach Silva began to say something, but Fox stopped him.

"Does Ellis look like a girl to you?" Fox asked. I could hear the venom in his tone and I didn't have to look at him to know that he was furious.

"Well, no–"

"Then why the hell would he use the girls' locker room?" Fox questioned rhetorically. "I can't believe you thought about it, said it out loud, and thought it was intelligent. That's probably one of the stupidest things I have ever heard."

I didn't look up from my skates, still too embarrassed to look at any of the guys' faces. I wished Fox had just left it alone, but he wouldn't and never would any time something like this happened. As captain, he had sworn to protect and represent all of his teammates, and he took that seriously.

"Whether you guys like it or not, Ellis is part of this team," Fox continued. "So trying to injure him isn't acceptable and any homophobic comments you have are to be kept to yourself."

I finally looked up and noticed that no one's eyes were on me. Fox had everyone's undivided attention, even Coach Silva and Merton.

"Let's end it here boys," Coach Silva announced after a few moments of silence. He glanced over at me briefly before addressing the team. "I want you all acting like a team by tomorrow afternoon or there *will* be hell to pay."

That was enough to send the team scurrying toward the locker room. I stayed behind, letting everyone go ahead of me. I didn't even want to enter the locker room while the rest of the team was in there, but I knew I couldn't keep Josh waiting. Keeping my head down, and my eyes glued to the floor, I entered the room. Most of the guys seemed unfazed by what had just happened, talking about random things, but I wasn't. Inherently knowing that some guys on the team were uncomfortable with my sexuality

was one thing, but having them outwardly express it was something I was hoping I had gotten away from when I fled my old school.

What had just happened caused me to feel uneasy and slightly unsafe for the first time since arriving at Pine Valley. My stomach was in knots and all I wanted was to be out of this locker room, but I was too afraid to move from my spot on the bench where I had sat down, staring at the floor.

Most of the guys went to the showers, leaving me alone in my row of lockers. I quickly stripped off my equipment and changed into my clothes, opting for taking a shower at home instead of in the locker room. I hated putting my clothes on while I was still sweaty from practice, but no one could pay me enough money to get into that shower with the rest of the team.

Fully dressed, I sat back down on the bench and waited for Josh. He didn't take too long and soon enough, the two of us silently made our way out to the car.

Josh broke the silence when we were a few minutes away from the school.

"Are you okay?" he asked me softly as I looked away from him out the window.

"I don't want to talk about it," I muttered, leaning my head against the window.

"I'm sorry, I–"

"Josh," I cut him off, "I don't want to talk at all."

He didn't say anything after that. I could tell he felt bad about what happened and he probably even felt bad about not stepping in. I didn't expect him to. I knew Josh wanted to stand up for me, but he didn't want to alienate any of his teammates either. It was a battle he was going to have to face and I wasn't going to hold my breath in hopes of him choosing me over them.

When we got home, I instantly got in the shower without saying a word to my family who was sitting down in the living room. I didn't have the energy. After my shower, I put on some clean boxers and sweatpants before throwing myself down on my bed.

I knew I didn't fit in anywhere at Pine Valley, but I had this false hope that once I was on the hockey team I would fit in there. Obviously, I couldn't have been more wrong. Hockey was the one thing that I knew I belonged in and I wished that I had that same sense of belonging with my team.

But I didn't.

And I hated it.

**

Hello everyone thanks for reading!!!

What do you think is going on with Elijah's mom? Do you think he should be worried. What about what happened with the team at practice and Fox sticking up for him?

Let me know what you think :)

07

I knew I was letting my tormentors win when I got changed in the boys' bathroom down the hall from the locker room the next day at practice, but I couldn't find it in me to care. Since yesterday, I hadn't felt safe around my teammates. If one of them could get violent with me on the ice in front of our coaches, then who knows what they could do to me in the privacy of the locker room.

I waited until a minute before practice officially started to sprint down the hall to the locker room. Thankfully, it was empty and I was able to get my skates on and head out to the ice without trouble. The team was gathered at center ice when I got there and I snuck up behind them without getting noticed.

Or so, I thought. Fox glared at me from the front of the group, but didn't say anything to interrupt Coach Silva or draw attention to me. When we dispersed to do drills, Fox skated closely next to me.

"You were late," he said in a low tone.

"I know," I replied, trying to distance myself from him.

"Don't make a habit out of it," Fox answered as he followed me over to the drill station.

Little did he know I planned on doing that for the rest of the season. Thankfully, Coach Silva had us doing drills and exercises throughout practice, omitting the scrimmage game. When practice ended, I stayed behind while the rest of the team entered the locker room.

"Something wrong, Ellis?" Coach Silva asked in a concerned tone. "Are any of the boys giving you trouble?"

I shook my head. "How long does the rink stay open?"

"I think they close it around eight on week nights, why?" Coach responded confusedly.

"I want to skate for a little while," I told him to which he nodded and disappeared down the tunnel toward his office.

I absentmindedly skated around the rink after placing my helmet down on the bench. The air blew through my hair, whispering in my ear as I glided back and forth on the rink. I was so distracted, I hadn't noticed Josh make his way out to the bench dressed in his clothes and seemingly ready to go home.

Josh cleared his throat loudly, causing me to snap my head toward him. I had completely forgotten that Josh would be waiting for me after practice. I sent him an apologetic look and skated over to the bench.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes," I told him, stepping off the ice.

"Why are you still out here?" he asked me, slightly quirking his head to the side in question.

"I just wanted to skate a little bit," I murmured as I made my way to the locker room, Josh following behind me.

Before entering the locker room, I poked my head in to make sure most of the team had left. My action didn't go unnoticed by Josh as I head him scoff from behind me.

"What, are you afraid of the team now because of yesterday?" he asked incredulously, giving me a disbelieving look.

I entered the room without answering him and quickly made my way to my locker. I didn't have to answer for him to know what he said was true.

"They're not going to do anything," Josh tried consoling me, "And it's just a few of them that think that stuff about you, most of them don't care."

"It doesn't matter Josh," I replied in annoyance. I didn't want to talk to him about this. It was embarrassing enough without having to discuss it with

Josh.

Josh left me alone to get dressed and I met him out at the car a few moments later. I was sure to put my earbuds in so that he wouldn't be compelled to start a conversation with me. When we got home, I went straight up to my room and showered soon after. I was sitting at my desk, doing my homework when my father knocked on my door.

"Come in," I mumbled, putting my pencil down.

Dad opened the door before stepping into my room and closing it behind him. He took a seat at the foot of my unmade bed and I turned my chair around so that I could face him.

"Is everything going okay at school?" Dad asked softly.

I groaned. "Did Josh tell you about what happened yesterday?"

Dad nodded. "He told me. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it doesn't matter," I reasoned.

"It does matter," Dad argued, leaning forward toward me. "I want you to be safe at this school, and if you're not safe here, I'll put you somewhere that you will be."

"I hate to break it to you, but homophobes exist everywhere," I replied sarcastically. "Especially on sports teams."

"Well that's unacceptable," Dad told me, shaking his head. "I'll have a talk with your coach."

"Dad, no," I pleaded. "I promise it's fine. It's been taken care of."

Dad looked at me for a few moments as if he was trying to decide whether or not he wanted to believe me. He let out a heavy sigh and nodded.

"Fine," he finally responded, "but if anything else happens, and I mean *anything* , I want you to tell me."

"Okay," I agreed, though I wasn't sure whether I would actually follow through on my promise.

My father patted my shoulder and annoyingly ruffled my hair before exiting my room. I let out a sigh of my own and turned back to my homework. The last thing I wanted was my dad getting involved with the team. The only thing that would do was embarrass me further and make me a bigger target.

All I wanted was to play hockey, but that seemed to be getting harder and harder.

***

"Morning, Elijah," Trevor cheerfully greeted me at my locker the next morning.

I wasn't in the greatest of moods. Since Josh had told my father about what happened with the hockey team, there was a palpable tension between us. He knew I was annoyed at him for talking to my dad, and I knew that he knew that, so the two of us didn't say a word to each other on the ride to school this morning.

"Hey," I grumbled, pulling open my locker.

"I just wanted to ask you if it was okay if I got the GSA members to go to your first hockey game on Friday?" Trevor asked, hope filling his voice.

I suppressed a groan. "You don't need to do that."

"I want to make sure you have support," Trevor replied kindly, a smile that never seemed to go away decorated his face.

I sighed and turned to face him. "I don't care, but *please* don't make it a big deal, like no signs or anything. Please."

Trevor chuckled, leaning against the locker next to mine. "Fine, no signs. I can do that."

"Thank you," I replied in relief, shutting my locker door.

"Maybe if you're up for it, we can all go out after the game?" Trevor suggested. "To celebrate your first game here."

"Sure," I agreed with a shrug. Trevor's face lit up as he nodded at me happily.

"Great, I'll let the club know today," he assured me.

Great , I thought sarcastically. Poor Trevor was too nice for his own good. He went out of his way to make me feel welcome and I didn't even want to spend any time doing the things he planned.

By the time I got to my English class, the room was pretty full. Lexa and Nadia decided to skip class, presumably to feel each other up in a janitor's closet, so I was left sitting alone, not that I minded much.

"Ellis!" I heard Ryan call out from behind me. I sighed as I turned around to see him waving me over to where him and the others were sitting. I had no choice but to gather my things and walk over to my teammates before choosing a seat beside Ryan.

"Did Josh invite you out tonight?" Ryan asked as soon as I sat down.

I gave him a confused look and shook my head. Josh and I hadn't done much talking, not that we did usually, but it was even less now.

Jude rolled his eyes. "Of course he didn't, kid's useless."

Ryan nodded in agreement. "Anyway, we are going out for a little while after practice tonight. You in?"

"Where?" I wondered, already dreading the thought of going anywhere with the team.

"We're going to the sports pub to watch the Bruins game," Ryan answered. "Just a few of us, not the whole team."

While knowing the whole team wouldn't be there relieved me, I still didn't want to spend my night out with guys from the team. I would rather watch

the game in the comfort of my bedroom.

"You gotta come," Jude insisted. "It'll be fun. We do it quite a bit, it's kinda a tradition, but we can bring you in on it."

I looked over to Fox and Ian to see that they weren't even paying attention. The two of them were huddled together, looking at something on Ian's phone.

Ryan laughed, causing me to turn toward him. "Yeah, since you're Josh's brother and a badass hockey player and all, you can crash."

"I'll think about it," I responded with a tight, close lipped smile. I already knew I didn't want to go, and I was hoping they'd just forget they had asked me later on.

Ryan nodded before turning to say something to Jude and class started just moments after. I sighed and took out my notebook, trying hard to focus on anything but the presence of the hockey players around me.

***

Josh came barging into my room as I was napping after hockey practice. Practice was getting harder and more physically exhausting, leaving me wiped out afterward.

My head felt heavy as I picked it up off of my pillow and squinted and Josh standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing?" he asked me impatiently.

"M'sleepin," I mumbled, almost incoherently.

"Well get up," Josh demanded. "We're going to watch the B's game at the sports bar."

I groaned and stuffed my face into my pillow. I was hoping they'd forgotten about inviting me out tonight when no one mentioned it at practice. Of course, I had no such luck.

"Come on," Josh whined, walking over to my bed. "The guys are downstairs waiting."

I picked my head up again. "Who?"

"Ryan, Jude, Alex, and Fox," he answered. "Ian and Liam are meeting us there."

I let out another groan and got up from my bed despite my body begging me not to. I didn't have the energy to go anywhere, nor did I have the desire to.

I threw a sweatshirt on over my head and ran my fingers through my unruly hair to try and tame it before I followed Josh down the stairs.

"What were you doing sleeping so early anyway?" Josh asked, glancing back toward me.

I shrugged. "Tired."

"The guys have been here for a while. We thought you were eventually going to come down," Josh told me.

If I had even known Josh's friends were here I would be sure to lock myself in my room. The last thing I wanted to do was hang around with them, but there I was, following Josh to the subject of my dread because I was unable to say no.

"There you are, Ellis!" Ryan exclaimed when we entered the living room.

I greeted them with a slight nod and a tight smile.

"Were you hiding from us or something?" Jude joked, nudging Ryan in the ribs for him to laugh along.

"Nah," I denied with a shake of my head. Although, I would have been hiding from them if I had known they were here.

"He wouldn't hide from me," Alex teased, sending me a wink. "You guys on the other hand..."

All I could do was roll my eyes in response.

"You boys heading out?" Dad asked us, suddenly appearing in the doorway of the living room.

Josh nodded. "Yeah, we'll be home after the game."

Dad gave us all a slight smile before telling us to be safe. We all nodded in agreement and headed toward the front door to leave the house. When we got outside, I noticed only one other car was parked out on the curb. I mentally groaned, hoping they weren't going to try and squeeze us all into that one car.

Luckily for me, Josh headed to his own car and I was the only one to follow him, leaving all of the others riding in Fox's car.

By the time we got to the sports bar, Ian and Liam were already there and had saved us some seats around them. The place wasn't very big, but the bar at the center had four giant flat screen TVs that would be used to show the game. Ian and Liam were sitting at a high round table a little ways behind the bar. It looked barely big enough for all of us to sit there, but I assumed we would just have to manage.

Somehow, I ended up stuck between Ian and Fox and wondered if I should make one of them switch with me. Neither of them seemed to be bothered by the situation, but I sure was.

"You got this one to come out of his room?" Ian asked the guys, pointing his thumb toward me. I narrowed my eyes at him before directing my attention toward the TV. The game hadn't started yet, but I would rather watch a beer commercial than listen to the guys around me.

"Josh did," Ryan answered before signalling a waitress over.

"Hey boys," the waitress, whose name tag said Terry, greeted us with a wide smile. She looked older than us, but not old enough to be our mother. "How you all doin'?"

Each of the guys greeted her kindly, even Fox had a smile on for the woman which told me that they came here often and were already acquainted with Terry.

"Excuse my manners!" Terry said once she spotted me. "I'm Terry, and you are?"

I gave her a genuine smile. "Elijah."

"Nice to meet you," she politely replied. "You new to the team?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"He's Josh's brother," Jude informed her, eliciting a surprised expression on her face.

"Step-brother," I clarified and she nodded in understanding. Jude waved me off and gave me an expression as if telling me the clarification wasn't needed.

After a little more small talk with Terry, she took our drink orders and left the table. The game was about to start by the time she brought them back and took our order for food. We just ordered a few appetizers to share and something told me that the guys did this often with each other.

"I totally almost got with Beth the other night," Alex said with a smirk, bringing his soda glass up to his lips.

Ian rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you *think* you did."

"I'm serious!" Alex exclaimed, slamming his drink down on the table. "It was just me and Claudia over at Beth's and after Claudia left, Beth was totally putting the moves on me."

"So why didn't you seal the deal then?" Liam asked in an annoyed tone.

"Her parents came home and I had to leave through the window," Alex chuckled as if he found the whole situation humorous. The few times I had hung around Alex, I realized he didn't take anything to seriously.

"Why were you there with Beth and Claudia anyway?" Josh wondered, sounding slightly disapproving, and looked at Fox briefly.

Alex gave him a deadpanned look. "You *know* I have a thing for Beth."

The guys nodded.

"And besides, just because Fox and Claudia broke up doesn't mean I can't hang with her," Alex added with a shrug.

I knew Fox must have had girlfriends in the past, but hearing about it was odd considering I knew he was into guys. I just hoped he hadn't cheated on her with me.

Josh and Ian glared at Alex, but Fox didn't pay any attention to him. Fox was definitely the type to not be hung up on an ex. It wouldn't surprise me if he was the one who broke things off with her.

Nobody said anything else as the hockey game started. The yelling and profanity started within the first few minutes of the game as we all watched in frustration as the Bruins couldn't keep the puck out of their own zone.

"They're so fucking sloppy, it's ridiculous," Fox complained, leaning back in his chair and reaching out to rest his hand on the back of mine.

I couldn't help but agree with him. They weren't connecting their passes, their shots kept going wide, and they were making line changes at bad times. Playing like that wasn't going to get them anywhere.

"I don't know what their problem is," Ian said, leaning his elbows on the table with a hard look on his face.

"Coaching," I mumbled, so low I didn't think anyone would hear me.

"What?" Ian asked me confusedly.

"I said coaching is their problem," I said louder this time. "The line changes are ridiculous, he barely knows what he's doing."

"That, I can agree with you on," Fox surprised me by saying.

"He's probably still adjusting," Josh offered as an explanation. "He's used to being an assistant coach."

Fox shook his head. "No, he's been head coach for two seasons now and he was head coach for the Caps. He's just not a good one."

The guys all uttered words of agreement and I leaned back in my seat, causing my back to come into contact with Fox's hand. I shot forward and looked behind me, but he was unfazed, so I leaned back again and let my back rest near his hand that he decided not to move. Just as I looked up at the TV again, the other team scored, causing a round of curses throughout the entire building.

"They're shit," Fox muttered as Terry came back with our appetizers.

We all took some food and put it on our plates before directing our attention back to the game. Fox finally peeled his hand away from my chair so that he could eat. When I took my phone out to check the time, I heard sounds of protest coming from Alex, Ryan, and Jude.

"You can't be texting your boyfriend during guy time," Jude told me with a warning look.

"I was just checking the time," I said, showing him my blank lock screen.

Jude just rolled his eyes as if he didn't believe me. "Sure you were."

"So you're really datin' Trevor now?" Alex asked me with his mouth full.

My face pinched into an annoyed expression. "No."

Ryan fake coughed and under his breath he said, "Bullshit."

I didn't even warrant his comment with a response.

"Come on," Alex whined. "We're your friends, you *have* to tell us about who you're fucking. I told you about Beth!"

Ian snorted and shook his head. "You didn't fuck Beth."

"I almost did!" Alex defended himself. "And I told you guys about it."

"Alex," Josh said in a warning tone. "Stop it, seriously."

That was enough to get Alex to back off. I quickly glanced at Fox to see that he was looking uncomfortable and I didn't know if his change in mood was about the situation or about something else.

I rolled my eyes and turned back toward the TV. These guys weren't my friends.

**

Hello everyone. I almost forgot to post this chapter AGAIN because I've been distracted by Harry Styles (aka my favorite person ever). If you haven't yet, go watch his new video!!! (It's so hot you might need some ice). And stream/buy Lights Up!!! It's Hoctober guys, gals, and non-binary pals. HS2 IS COMING.

Anyway...

What did you think of the chapter? How do you think Elijah is dealing with what went on last chapter? What about his annoyance at Josh and his Dad? What did you think of the team going out?

Let me know!!!

Read/comment/vote!!! ❤❤❤

08

I would never forget the first *real* hockey game I ever played. Not the one when I was a toddler and we all barely even knew how to skate and spent most of our time sliding on our knees, but when I was a little older, about ten, I played in my first competitive hockey game. The thrill of it was exhilarating and I remembered feeling nervous only briefly. It was the time I truly fell in love with the game.

The first game I had ever played was ingrained in my mind and it would never go away. I remembered that on my first shift, one of the boys on the other team tripped me and sent me flying down onto the ice. I remembered letting a breakaway happen which resulted in a goal for the other team and how angry my teammate and ex best friend, Micah, was at me. But I also scored the game winning goal which caused my whole team to rally around me, giving me hugs and bumping my shoulder lightly with their fists. I would never forget the look of pride and approval on my mother's face.

It was the first time I truly felt like I belonged somewhere. It was at that moment I knew I was meant to play hockey and I truly felt as one with my team.

On Friday night, I had never felt more nervous to play a hockey game. It was highly unlike me to feel this way, but since I wasn't necessarily feeling as though I was part of the team, the nerves kicked in and my stomach was in knots. As I sat on the bench, fully dressed in my uniform, my leg bounced up and down uncontrollably and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I played with the straps on my helmet in my hands, careful to keep my eyes directed down at my lap while some of the other guys were still changing.

"Listen up boys," Coach Silva gathered our attention, clapping his hands together. "We're going to go out there and play our hardest tonight. You guys have shown me this week in practice that you are ready for this. So

let's go out there, and not make any stupid mistakes, and play how you've been playing all week long."

A few of the guys started an excited chant to get everyone hyped, but I couldn't find it in me to join. I would have with my old team. There, I might have even been the one starting the chant. But here, I didn't belong and I wasn't going to draw any unnecessary attention to myself.

We made our way out of the locker room and out onto the ice to skate around for warmups. The team we were playing came out shortly after us, being sure to stay on their side of the ice.

"Elijah," Coach Merton grabbed my attention as I skated by the bench.

"Hm?" I stopped in front of him.

"You and Ian are paired tonight. You're starting," he informed me to which I nodded and skated away.

I figured I would be paired with Ian. Coach Merton had been trying different defensive pairings all week so I had a chance to play with all of them, but there was no doubt that Ian and I were at our best when the two of us were paired.

For some strange reason, Ian and I clicked on the ice. We could read each other better than any other pairing on our team. It was a similar connection I had to my defensive partner on my old team, only this one was possibly even stronger.

When it was time for the game to start, Fox got ready to take the face off at the center dot, with Josh and Alex on the wings. The three of them were a great first line that had amazing offensive strength as well as defensive. Ryan, Jude, and Liam made up the second line of the team.

Fox won the face off cleanly over to Josh who immediately took off toward the goal. I followed and set myself up on the point across from Ian. The puck was batted back to me and I was quick to keep it from leaving the zone. I held onto it for a few seconds before passing it over to Ian, who

looked like he would have a better shot than me. Ian sent the puck low through the zone, but wasn't able to get the goal.

Eventually, the puck was passed back to me again and I didn't hesitate to take the shot and bury the puck in the back of the net. Excitement swirled all around me and my teammates gathered around me in a hug. It wasn't probably the first time I had seen Fox and Ian genuinely smile since I got here.

And Fox's smile was something out of a dream.

***

"Good game, boys!" Coach Silva exclaimed in the locker room after we had won. "I'll see you all on Monday."

I quickly changed out of my clothes and headed toward the showers. I wanted to be out of here as soon as possible, but I didn't want to smell when I went out with Trevor and the GSA kids tonight.

I was out of the shower before anyone else had made it in and dried off before putting on some tight fitting sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

"Good game, Ellis," Number 21 said as I stood at my locker, gathering my things.

"You too," I quickly let out in a breathy tone.

"You gonna come out with the team tonight?" he asked, leaning against the locker next to mine.

I shook my head. "I have plans."

I looked up to see Ian was eyeing Number 21 with a slightly suspicious expression, looking as if he was waiting to have to come over and rescue me.

"Shame," 21 said, "Next time then."

"Sure," I replied with a strained smile, tightly gripping my bag.

"By the way, Ellis," Number 21 started, "I wanted to apologize for what I said the other day at practice."

His words surprised me, yet unsettled me at the same time. I didn't trust him enough to believe there wasn't some ulterior motive with him making amends with me.

"Oh," I dumbly replied. "Thanks."

"Yeah, I'm really sorry," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "I didn't even realize it was homophobic when I said it. I swear that wasn't my intention."

I nodded. "It's alright."

"When I said it, I just thought it would make you *and* the guys more comfortable and that was all I meant by it," he told me sincerely. "But I had a long talk with Fox and he explained to me why it was homophobic and that it made you really uncomfortable and I'm *really* sorry for that. I don't want you to be uncomfortable with the team."

"You talked with Fox?" I gaped, my jaw slacking and my eyebrows raised. I knew Fox had defended me before, but I never expected him to try to get people to understand what was wrong with their words.

21 chuckled. "Yeah he set me straight."

"Everything alright over here, Corey?" Fox questioned with his arms crossed over his chest and he stood before us.

Number 21, Corey, nodded. "Just apologizing. Sorry again." And with that he walked off over to his locker.

"You didn't have to do that," I told Fox, thought I was grateful he did.

"I didn't do anything, I was just asking–"

"Not that," I cut him off with an eye roll. "I meant make him apologize to me. You didn't have to do that."

Fox just shrugged. "Teams don't work when players are at odds."

I knew that wasn't the real reason he did it, he just didn't want to admit that there was a nice person underneath his rough exterior. I didn't bring that up to him though, I would just let him believe he had me fooled.

***

"Good game!" Trevor exclaimed when I met him out in the parking lot, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Thank you," I chuckled, stumbling a bit.

I was in a noticeably better mood thanks to our win and Corey's apology. I wasn't even dreading going out with the GSA kids like I was earlier. Nadia, Lexa, and Holly all stood off to the side, eyeing Trevor and I, while Johnny and Austin were watching the hockey players as they came out into the parking lot.

"I don't know how you do it, man," Austin said, watching one of my teammates as he walked by. "Some of them are so hot."

I rolled my eyes, releasing Trevor. "Cut it out."

"I'm just saying," Austin turned to me with a smirk. "Here comes that brother of yours."

I looked to where Austin was pointing to see that Josh was making his way over to us. I raised an eyebrow at him in question as he sent a glance toward Trevor before looking back at me.

"Are you going to come with us?" Josh asked me, adjusting his hockey bag on his shoulder.

I shook my head. "I'm going out with them," I replied, pointing my thumb back toward the group.

Josh nodded. "Okay. Will you need a ride later?"

"I might," I said with a shrug.

"I can drive you home later," Trevor piped up kindly, coming to stand beside me and in front of Josh. "It'll be no problem."

Josh gave him a wary look that I couldn't decipher, leaving me wondering why he was being so standoffish toward Trevor. He had never shown this sort of discomfort toward him before.

"Thanks, Trev," I said with a smile, trying to take the attention away from Josh's scrutinizing stare.

"Okay," Josh said, still staring at Trevor. "Be safe. Call me if you need me."

And with that, Josh met up with Fox who was waiting for him a little ways away. Fox let his gaze linger on Trevor and I until Josh reached him and the two of us walked away.

"God, he's so hot," Austin said in an exaggerated tone, clapping his hand down on my shoulder and causing Johnny to let out a loud laugh.

"You're so desperate it's nauseating," Johnny told him with a shake of his head.

"I'm sure Elijah doesn't want to hear you lusting over his brother," Trevor told Austin with an eye roll, turning to face him.

"Step-brother," I clarified. No matter how long I knew Josh, he never felt like my actual brother, so I didn't want to refer to him as such.

The guys ignored my comment as the girls walked over to us with impatient looks on their faces.

"Are you guys going to sit here and drool over the hockey players or can we get going?" Nadia questioned rudely, placing her hands on her hips.

"Where are we even going?" I turned to ask her.

"An LGBT club," she replied nonchalantly, causing me to laugh. She couldn't be serious. However, the look on her face told me she was dead serious and when I glanced at everyone else, they had the same expressions.

"...You're serious?" I wondered in disbelief.

They all nodded.

I shook my head. "I'm not dressed for that!"

Nadia rolled her eyes at me. "It doesn't matter, it's a lowkey place. Nothing wild, you're not ready for that yet."

I looked to Trevor with my eyes bugging out of my head and he placed a comforting hand on my arm.

"It's fun and it doesn't matter how you're dressed," he assured me. "Like Nadia said, it's nothing crazy."

"Can we even get into this place? Aren't clubs 18 plus?" I asked incredulously.

"Not this one, I told you it's lowkey," Nadia responded in annoyance.

I didn't know what to think, so I decided to just go along with it. Although I didn't know them all very well, I knew they wouldn't bring me anywhere outrageous. They weren't the type of people to go clubbing and get drunk every weekend. I appreciated that about them.

"So, are we ready?" Nadia asked, impatiently tapping her foot on the pavement.

"Yes, Nadia. Jesus Christ," Johnny spat, rolling his eyes and walking off toward his car.

Nadia looked as if she was going to run after him and give him a piece of her mind, but Lexa grabbed her arm before she had the chance and placing a soothing hand on her back to calm her down.

"I'm going to throttle him one of these days," she grumbled before she walked off with Lexa and Holly to the car they would be taking.

Austin let out a sigh. "This oughtta be fun."

Trevor gave me a timid smile, motioning me to follow him over to Johnny's car with Austin walking ahead of us. I sat in the back seat with Trevor while Johnny barely waited for us to be in the car before putting it in drive and heading out of the parking lot.

It didn't take long for us to reach the club. It was almost hidden from view of the street as if it were a secret. If you didn't know where to find it, you wouldn't. We made it there a few minutes before the girls and waited on them before heading inside. Nadia wasn't kidding when she said the place was lowkey. It appeared more as a hang out spot than a club. There were pool tables and a dance floor on one side while there were tables and a bar on the other. Most of the people in there appeared to be around our age.

"I told you it was nothing crazy," Nadia said, nudging me on the shoulder, before waltzing over to a table near the back.

The rest of us followed her and pulled up some extra chairs so that we could all fit at the table. I looked around the place and saw that it was pretty busy, but not overly so. There appeared to be many groups like our own around at the tables and a few girls were over at the pool tables.

"So, what do you think?" Trevor asked with a kind smile.

"It's not bad," I replied, looking toward him.

"Only problem is, you have to go to the bar to order shit," Nadia added, rolling her eyes and leaning back in her seat with her arms crossed.

"Do you want me to order you something?" Lexa asked her, looking up from her phone.

Before Nadia could answer, another voice called out to us, causing all of us to look toward the source.

"Hey guys," a small, blonde haired girl said as she walked over to our table with a few other people.

"Hey, Claudia," Trevor greeted kindly. My eyes widened when he said her name.

Claudia, as in Fox's ex girlfriend.

"Were you guys at the game earlier?" she asked, resting her hand on Trevor's chair.

Trevor nodded enthusiastically. "Elijah plays."

Claudia turned to me with wide eyes and a look of approval.

"We haven't met yet," Claudia stated, "I've heard about you."

"You have?" I asked incredulously. I could also say the same about her, but I wouldn't.

"Of course," she replied with a nod. "You're supposed to be some hockey *God* like Fox. Everyone's excited about you, even if they don't show it."

Her words did little to comfort me or make me feel more welcome. I knew the reason people weren't showing their excitement about me was because I was gay. I was sure if I was some straight guy, I would be getting all the praise like Fox does.

"Anyway, just wanted to say hi," Claudia said, directing away from me and to the group. "By the way, cute top, Holly." Claudia winked at Holly before walking away, leaving Holly to stare at her with a longing look as she left.

"When are you going to get with her?" Austin asked Holly, snapping her out of her daze. Holly's face heat up and she looked down at the table to hide her obvious blush.

"She doesn't like me like that," Holly murmured timidly.

"I'm confused," I interjected, "I thought Claudia dated Fox?"

Nadia rolled her eyes. "Bisexual people exist, Elijah."

"So Claudia's bisexual?"

"That's what I just said, isn't it?" Nadia sarcastically replied, standing up from the table. "I'm going to order something."

Lexa got up and went with her while the rest of us stayed at the table. Austin sparked up a conversation, but I couldn't focus on it. I couldn't help but glance over at where Claudia danced around with her friends and wonder what went on with her and Fox.

**

Hey everyone! Thanks for reading.

What did you think of the first hockey game? And the apology to Elijah? How about Elijah's outing with the GSA kids and meeting Claudia?

Let me know!

09

I slept in later than usual on Saturday morning. Trevor didn't drop me off at home until late the night before and I felt guilty since my Dad had waited up for me.

After rolling over on my bed and checking my phone for the time, I realized it was past twelve. I groaned and pushed myself up off of the bed before heading downstairs. When I got there, I saw that my Dad was the only one home. It was oddly quiet without Mindy and Ava arguing in the kitchen.

"Morning, or should I say, afternoon," Dad joked when he saw me enter the kitchen.

"Hey," I rasped, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. "I'm sorry I came home so late last night."

Dad just waved me off as if saying "no big deal."

"I'm just glad you're finally going out with your friends," he told me with a smile.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that they weren't really my friends, so I stayed quiet and gave him a tight lipped smile before making my way over to the fridge to get a bottle of water and some milk for a bowl of cereal.

"Did you have fun?" Dad asked as I poured myself some cereal.

When I saw him waiting for me last night, we didn't speak much. I told him I was tired and he told me we would talk in the morning and now it was that time and I still didn't want to talk to him about it.

"Yeah, it was fun," I told him, taking a bit of cheerios I was eating over at the counter. I wasn't lying. I actually did have a good time out with the GSA kids after I stopped obsessing over Fox and Claudia.

"That's good," Dad replies cheerfully. "Where'd you go?"

"Just some restaurant," I stretched the truth. I didn't know how he would feel about me going to a club, no matter how subdued it was.

"What one?" he asked curiously.

"Um," I stammered, looking everywhere but him. "You've probably never been there."

"Oh. Is it some new place?" he asked me. "Maybe we can go some time."

My face flushed and I took a long sip of water before glancing at his curious expression.

"It's actually, it's uh," I stumbled on my words. "It's an LGBT place."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Oh," was all he said.

I looked awkwardly down at my bowl as I nodded in confirmation.

"That's great, Elijah," he added a few moments later, causing me to look up at him. "I'm glad you're hanging out with people you can relate to."

I nodded. "Me too."

"If only there were other LGBT hockey players in the area," Dad joked. "Then you could really relate to each other."

If only . I mentally rolled my eyes.

"By the way, great game last night. I'm really proud of you," Dad said, standing up from his seat and patting me on the shoulder.

"Thanks." Then a thought dawned on me. "Where is everyone?"

"Mindy is shopping with her friend, Ava's at a birthday party, and Joshua stayed at Ryan's," Dad answered. "Which reminds me, since we're alone, I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Your mother," he told me with a grimace clear on his face.

It was clear neither of us wanted to discuss her, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious about why she called the other day.

"Let's sit," Dad suggested and I followed him over to the kitchen table, sitting across from him. "So you know she called me the other day."

I nodded, urging him to continue.

"She was asking to speak to you," he admitted, giving me a look I couldn't really decipher, but I assumed it was one meant to comfort me.

"Why?" I asked confusedly.

"I'm not really sure. She said she had to talk to you and she wanted to see you," he replied carefully.

"And you told her no," I finished for him.

"I did," he said with a nod, "but I don't want to keep you from your mother if *you* want to speak to her."

I didn't know how to answer because I didn't even know myself if I wanted to speak to her.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Elijah," Dad started to fill the silence I left. "I don't want you to speak to her or go see her, at least not right now."

"Why?" I managed to choke out.

"I don't believe her intentions with you are what's best for you," he answered. "I don't think she's just changed her mind about you being gay and I think what she has to say could be harmful to you and I don't trust her."

There was no doubt my Dad loved me, but did he really know what was best for me? The two of us barely had a relationship until I got kicked out of my mother's house and while I didn't entirely blame him for that, that was still partially his responsibility.

"But like I said," he continued when I didn't say anything, "I don't want to keep you from her if you want to see her. The decision is yours to make, but please think about it for a while before you decide."

All I could do was nod at his words. He reached across the table and placed his hand over mine in a comforting way.

Before anything else could be said, the sound of the front door opening and closing filled the house and Josh made his way into the kitchen a few moments later.

"Oh, sorry," he said when he saw the two of us. "Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"You didn't," Dad assured him. "We just finished."

Josh nodded before he made his way over to the fridge for a bottle of water. He placed his bag down on the floor next to him and walked over to where we sat at the table.

"How was your night with Trevor?" Josh asked me, though his tone told me he was only asking to annoy me.

"It was fine," I grumbled, looking over to my father and hoping he wouldn't say anything about Trevor. The last thing I needed was him questioning me about it too.

"Did you go home with him?" Josh asked, causing my eyes to bug out of my head.

" *Josh* ," I hissed in annoyance, sending a nasty scowl his way.

"No, my good son came home last night, unlike my other one," Dad teased with a smirk up at Josh.

Josh rolled his eyes, taking a sip of water and leaning back against the counter.

"You have a good night?" Dad asked Josh to which he just shrugged.

"Yeah it was fine," he answered, looking down at the floor.

A wide smile painted itself on Dad's face as he looked lovingly between Josh and me. Dad let out a content sigh before he spoke.

"I'm so happy I get to watch both of my boys on the same team," Dad admitted. "I'm proud of you both."

"Dad," I groaned.

"Don't go sappy on us right now, Dan," Josh said with a pleading look.

"Okay, okay," Dad replied, standing up from the table with his hands out in front of him in defense. "Fine, I won't tell you guys how much I *love* you and watching you play."

"Yes, please don't," I replied, looking up at him through hooded eyes.

He playfully shook his head. "Fine, I'll take this as my cue to leave."

After he left the room, Josh and I sat in silence, the only sound being him sipping his water as he continued to lean against the counter.

"So," Josh started and I nearly groaned, knowing this conversation would end up somewhere I didn't want it to be. "I'm surprised you didn't let Trevor have his way with you last night."

I glared at him and stood up from my chair. "What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem."

"You obviously do," I spat in annoyance, "You're always bringing up Trevor like it would be a crime if I decided to be with him. Not to mention how you acted around him last night."

Josh's casual look changed to a sardonic one at my words.

"And how did I act around him last night?" he asked mockingly.

"Like you were uncomfortable around him," I nearly shouted. "You were being rude."

"Was I?"

All I could do was let out an irritated huff and storm out of the kitchen. I wasn't going to stand there and let Josh ridicule me and what I had to say. Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe the way he was acting was all in my head.

***

"Guys, listen up!" Fox exclaimed as the team got ready in the locker room.

Conversation ceased and all eyes were on Fox as he climbed up to stand on top of a bench in the center of the locker room.

"This weekend we have back to back away games, so you each need to hand in fifty dollars for the hotel to either me or one of the coaches," he announced, waving around the envelope in his hand. "And any donations for a teammate who needs some help are welcome."

Fox jumped down from the bench and conversation started up again.

"Dan gave me a hundred for us," Josh said, coming to stand next to me.

I nodded. "Okay."

I still wasn't really on speaking terms with Josh ever since our slight argument over the weekend. It seemed like I was never actually keen to speaking to Josh and it bothered me, but it wasn't like he ever made an effort to make amends with me either. So I tried not to let it bother me too much.

I slowly finished getting ready before heading out to the ice with the rest of the team. Ever since Corey had apologized to me, I felt less afraid of what the other guys on the team thought of me. Not to mention, they were warmer toward me after I scored in our first game. I wouldn't consider any of them my friends, but it was a start.

I spent the majority of practice with Ian doing defensive drills and practicing D to D passes. Coach Silva and Merton had already established the two of us would be partners for most of the season, not that I expected anything different.

"Hey Ian," I called out as the two of us continued our pass drills.

"What?" he grumbled, sending the puck my way.

Part of me felt like I should just leave Ian alone, knowing he would never like me for some unknown reason. But the other part wanted to have some type of relationship with him since we were going to be working together for the season, whether that relationship be as friends or just acquaintances.

"How does the whole hotel thing work for the away games?" I asked, stopping the puck with my stick and sending it back to him.

"What kind of question is that?" he snapped, sending me an annoyed look.

I rolled my eyes. "I meant who gets roomed with who and where are we staying."

Ian shrugged. "Coach Merton usually makes the room assignments and we stay in whatever hotel lets us."

Before I could reply, Coach Silva blew his whistle to signal for us to start new drills. Ian slid the puck on his stick and glided away from me toward the center of the ice where the rest of the team was lining up for drills. I shook my head before following him. He was going to be tough to crack.

After practice, I quickly changed and showered before the majority of the team had the chance to get in the showers and then sat on the bench in front

of my locker to wait for Josh. It took me a moment to realize that I was alone with Fox in our row of lockers. Without really thinking about it, I reached into my wallet and pulled out a ten dollar bill I had stashed in there.

"Here," I said, thrusting my hand with the money out toward Fox.

He raised his eyebrow in a confused expression. "What is that for?"

"To donate to whoever needs it," I said as if I was stating the obvious, shaking the bill in my hand.

Fox just stared at it for a few moments before taking it from me and giving me a nod as a thanks. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to get any more words out of him, so I left it at that and pulled my phone out as I continued to wait for Josh to be finished.

"You ready?" Josh startled me as he came up behind me, causing me to jump slightly at his voice.

I nodded and stood up from the bench, pulling my bags with me, and left the locker room with Josh. We were in the car for a few minutes before Josh decided to speak.

"Coach Merton will probably put you and I in the same hotel room," Josh told me, never taking his eyes off the road.

"Okay?" I responded in confusion as to why he decided to share that information. I had figured we would be rooming together because I knew the coaches wouldn't want to put me with anyone who could potentially harass me.

"I'm just letting you know because it's four to a room and I usually room with Fox and I know you two are weird with each other," Josh explained further.

"We're not weird with each other," I mumbled my lie.

"Yeah, okay," he sarcastically replied. I could telling he was rolling his eyes without even looking at him. "Everyone notices it."

I chose not to reply. At the moment, I couldn't think of any excuse as to why Fox and I wouldn't like each other that would make any sense. And it wasn't like I could tell him the truth. No matter how Fox treated me, I would never even think of outing him to anyone.

**

Thanks for reading!

Since this chapter is a little short I figured I'd post it early.

What did you think about Elijah's conversation with his Dad? What about the tension between him and Josh? What do you think is going to go down at the away games?

Let me know what you think!!

10

I was profusely sweating.

Coach Silva and Merton decided that the day before we left for our away games, we would have an off-ice practice. Which basically meant it was a lot of working out, running around, and circuit training. To say that it was exhausting would be an understatement. My legs were burning and I couldn't wait to lie down in my bed and do nothing for hours.

"Finish this workout and you can go!" Coach Silva announced and I sighed in relief.

Off-ice practices were definitely not my thing.

I pushed through the last workout, my breath roughly ripping through my chest as I did so. As soon as Coach Silva blew his whistle for us to stop, I lied down on the floor along with the rest of the team and rested.

"Don't forget we are meeting here at nine AM tomorrow so we can use the ice for practice as soon as we get there," Coach Merton reminded us. "Don't be late."

The coaches left the gym while the rest of us were still catching our breath on the floor. The only one standing upright was Fox, though that didn't surprise me. He casually sipped on his water with one hand on his hip and looked down at the team in irritated disbelief.

"If you guys can't handle this, then it's going to be a long season," Fox let out with a scoff, walking leisurely toward the exit of the gym.

I let out a pained groan and heaved myself off of the floor, following Fox toward the locker room. When I entered the room, he was standing by his locker and pulling his sweaty shirt over his head. I redirected my gaze so I wouldn't get caught up in staring at his impressive torso. I was afraid if I

looked too long I would reminisce about our time together over the summer and I wanted to keep those thoughts out of my head.

"Did you not have to do circuit training in prep school hockey?" Fox asked in an almost mocking tone that was laced with anger and annoyance.

"I did," I told him, stepping by him to get to my locker. "Hated it then too."

Fox scoffed and shook his head. "You were sloppy."

I rolled my eyes and let out a little laugh. "You were watching me? How sweet."

Fox slammed his locker door and turned his body toward me. I made sure to keep my eyes off of his glistening chest and keep them directed at his hate filled expression.

"Don't say shit like that to me," he seethed.

"Calm down, I was just kidding," I told him, keeping my voice light.

"Well don't," he hissed. "Just because you get to be out and proud doesn't mean everyone else does."

His voice was reminiscent of a snake, low, hissing, and venomous. It made my hair stand on my arms and I struggled to figure out why he was even bringing this up.

"What the hell? What are you talking about?" I dared to ask, my voice raising in annoyance.

"You saying shit like that to me, isn't cool," Fox explained in a low voice. "If you do that in front of the others, I'll pound you."

"God, Fox. I didn't mean anything by it. Can you just chill out?"

He just shook his head with a scowl directed at me.

"And you think I get to be 'out and proud?'" I continued, pointing my finger toward my chest.

"You do," Fox answered, raising an eyebrow at me.

I let out a humorless laugh. "You say that as if I didn't literally *get kicked out of my house* ."

"You still get to be who you are," Fox replied, his voice strained.

"Yeah, I do," I responded. "And it cost me nearly everything," I seethed through gritted teeth. "No one is stopping you from—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Fox shouted at me. I let out a deep breath and shook my head at him.

"Just because you're frustrated with your situation, doesn't mean you can take it out on me," I angrily told him. "I don't have it as easy as you like to think I do."

And with that, I stormed out of the locker room and I swore steam was coming out of my ears.

When I got outside to Josh's car, I groaned and threw my head back when I realized the car was locked. I should have known, but my anger at Fox had clouded my thoughts and all I could think about was my rage.

"Didn't you shower?" Josh asked, walking toward the car as I leaned against it.

"I will at home," I mumbled, tearing the car door open after Josh unlocked it.

Josh glanced at me as he slid into the driver's seat. He glanced at me a few more times before starting the car.

"Are you pissed at me or something?" Josh asked me as he started driving.

"Don't wanna talk," I grumbled, leaning my head against the window.

"Look, I'm sorry for acting weird about Trevor, okay?"

I stayed silent and let out a sigh. Thinking about my argument with Josh was only going to make me even more angry.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," Josh softly confessed.

My neck snapped to look at him with an incredulous annoyance.

"By who? Trevor?" I scoffed in disbelief. Trevor was just about the nicest person I had ever met.

"No," Josh shook his head. "I'm just worried if you get a boyfriend, then people will start to mess with you."

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "Then can you just take my word for it that I don't like Trevor like that?"

"But he likes you–"

"Josh," I sent him a glare.

He sighed. "Fine."

Josh was usually perceptive enough to realize when I didn't want to talk about something, but I had come to find out that wouldn't stop him from talking about it if he wanted to.

Josh and I wordlessly went into the house after he pulled the car into the driveway. I quickly ascended the stairs to take a shower in the upstairs bathroom and after I finished and was drying myself off, there was a knock on the door.

"What?" I asked, wrapping the towel around my waist and opening the door to reveal Josh.

"You have company," Josh told me with a boastful look.

I raised my eyebrow at him in question. "Who?"

"Trevor."

My eyes widened and I darted my head out of the doorway to look down the hall, pulling the towel tighter against my body.

"He's here?"

Josh nodded. "He's downstairs. I suggest you get dressed if you don't want to give him any ideas."

I glared at Josh before I scurried out of the bathroom and into my bedroom. I quickly pulled on some clothes and headed down the stairs to greet my visitor.

"Hey, Trev," I said, my voice sounding as confused as I felt.

Trevor smiled widely at me. "Hey, Elijah. Sorry to drop by like this."

I shook my head. "It's fine."

I looked over to my Dad and Mindy who were sitting on the couch with the TV, but neither of them were watching it. Instead, they were watching the interaction between Trevor and I.

"Why don't we go upstairs," I suggested, motioning my head toward the stairs. Trevor nodded and walked over to me.

"Keep the door open, please," Dad lightly demanded, causing my face to flush.

"Dad," I hissed, shaking my head at him, before leading Trevor up to my room and tightly shutting the door once we were inside.

Trevor looked around my bare room with an interested look on his face.

"Your room is nice," he said to fill the silence in the air.

It really wasn't that nice. I hadn't decorated it at all and there was nothing personal about it. It was as if it wasn't really *my* room. I just slept here, but

it didn't feel like a place to call my own.

I awkwardly cleared my throat. "Thanks. What are you doing here?"

Trevor's eyes widened as if my words had reminded him that he came here with a purpose. He fumbled taking something out of his pocket and shoving it toward me. I looked down at the item Trevor presented to me and saw that it was a rainbow colored bracelet. It was different colored strings tied together in an intricate design.

"We made these at GSA today and the club thought it would be a good idea to make one for you," Trevor rushed out. "To wish you good luck for your away games this weekend."

I grinned at him, taking the bracelet from his hand to get a better look at it.

"It's great. Thanks, Trev."

He nodded and returned my smile, holding up his wrist to show me his similar bracelet. I wouldn't call the two bracelets matching, but it was obvious that Trevor had made both of them.

"Want to tie it on for me?" I asked, presenting Trevor my wrist and holding out the bracelet for him to take. He quickly nodded and began tying the bracelet.

"Is that too loose?" he asked me before finishing the knot, looking up at me with a strange expression.

"No."

Trevor finished off the knot and took a step away from me. I smiled down at the bracelet, that now handsomely decorated my wrist, and then looked over at Trevor whose face was flushed pink.

"I should probably get going," Trevor announced after a moment of silence.

"Okay."

Trevor seemed to be having a debate with himself in his head. After a moment he rushed toward me and pulled me into an unexpected hug. I stumbled backward slightly and put one of my arms around him, shocked at his action.

"Good luck," he whispered in my ear before pulling away, looking slightly embarrassed.

I awkwardly scratched the back of my neck in discomfort.

"Thanks, Trev. See you Monday."

And with that, he gave me a small wave and exited my room. My eyes stayed glued to the doorway where he left for a few moments before Dad appeared there.

"There was no funny business up here, right?" Dad asked, looking around my room as if he would find any evidence.

I let out an annoyed sigh. "No, Dad."

He warily glanced at me as if he was deciding on whether he wanted to believe me.

"Okay," he replied after seeming to come to a conclusion in his mind. "But just because you can't get pregnant doesn't mean I'm okay with you having boys up here with the door closed."

My whole body heat up at his words and my eyes shifted toward the ceiling so I wouldn't have to make eye contact with him.

"Got it," I stated, my posture rigid and uncomfortable, matching the way I felt at that moment.

"Good," Dad replied, clearing his throat. "Goodnight, Elijah. Get some rest."

I nodded. "Goodnight."

Thankfully after that, my Dad left the room and I could leave my spot in the center of the floor and make my way over to my bed. Nothing could mortify me more than my father talking about my sex life. However, the unexpected gesture of affection from Trevor was also a source of my discomfort for the night.

I decided I shouldn't read too much into the incident with Trevor. There should be nothing strange about a hug, yet here I was obsessing over what hidden meanings and implications it could have. It was just a friendly hug.

It didn't take long for me to fall asleep once I shut off the thoughts in my mind.

***

Josh and I were running late.

I didn't know how it happened, but we were both scrambling to get ready this morning and barely made it out of the house on time. It was made clear to us that the bus would be leaving no later than nine-thirty and that we were supposed to meet at the school at nine to avoid anyone missing the bus.

It was currently nine-twenty and Josh and I were still a ways away from the school. He was breaking just about every traffic law I could think of to ensure we would make it to that damn bus on time and I let him. I didn't want to face the wrath of our coaches, or worse, Fox Ridley.

I held onto the handle above my seat and Josh whipped around a corner, causing me to slam into the passenger door.

Josh pulled into the parking lot at nine-twenty-eight and the two of us quickly grabbed our things and sprinted over to the bus where our team was already boarded. We threw our bags into the storage compartment of the bus before rushing to get on.

"You were supposed to be here at nine," Fox said in an irritated tone as Josh and I ran up the steps of the bus.

I ignored him while Josh said, "We're here, aren't we?"

Josh and I sat down across from Fox and Ian toward the front of the bus. Everyone else was chatting and didn't even notice our late arrival, but of course, Fox would be the one to notice like he noticed everything.

I leaned my head against the window and put my headphones in, closing my eyes and hoping to get some more sleep for the hour and a half long drive.

It seemed as though I was only asleep for a few minutes when I felt somebody shoving my shoulder lightly. The force startled me, causing me to shoot straight up in my seat.

"We gotta go to practice," Josh told me, standing in the aisle and leaning toward me. As he stood in the aisle, Josh was holding up the line of our team behind him and causing a chorus of protests and sounds of annoyance.

I nodded at him, throwing my head back with a yawn. Josh headed off the bus a few moments later while I gathered myself.

"Let's go, Ellis," Ryan said, smacking my bus seat as he walked by.

I heaved myself up off the seat and made my way off the bus and into the rink where the rest of my team was after getting my hockey bag from the storage compartment.

I quickly got ready in the locker room before making my way to the ice and skating around with some of my teammates while the rest of the team got ready. I was still tired from my sleep, my eyes feeling heavy.

This was going to be a *long* practice if I couldn't keep my eyes open.

**

So I've been neglecting all my schoolwork this week and spent my time writing and going to the gym and watching movies and watching youtube videos.... so I have a ton to do but I got this chapter ready so

yay for that. I really want to start updating twice a week again but I know it's going to be so hard for me :(

What did you think of the chapter? What about Fox and Elijah's argument? His confrontation with Josh? And Trevor paying him a visit? Any predictions for next chapter?

Let me know!

11

Practice was brutal, but it seemed like that was always going to be the case.

When Coach Silva and Merton decided to end it, they brought us to center ice to tell us who we would be rooming with once we got to the hotel. Of course, I was stuck with Fox, Ian, and Josh.

The hotel was just five minutes away from the rink and everyone excitedly ran up to their rooms, probably happy to be away from adult supervision for a few hours. I lazily followed behind Fox, Ian, and Josh into the elevator and then down the hall on the third floor to our room.

Fox opened our door and the four of us went in, Josh and Ian running to fight for the bed by the window.

"I called it on the bus, Josh," Ian snapped, lying back on the bed and shoving Josh away with his foot.

"You *know* I need to be near the window," Josh complained. "Can we share?"

My eyes widened at his words and I quickly shook my head, though nobody was looking at me. My words were lodged in my throat and I was stuck in a panic.

"You're sharing with your brother," Fox cut in, dropping his bag next to the bed by the window. I silently thanked him and let out a breath of relief as I sat down on the bed that Josh and I would be sharing.

If I had to share a bed with Fox, I would have ended up on the floor.

Josh let out a long sigh before sitting down on the bed beside me and throwing himself back so he was lying down. I took two pillows on the bed and set up a barrier in the middle, similar to what Ian was doing on his bed.

It was such a straight guy thing to do, but it was a force of habit I gained from my old team.

After setting up our barrier and taking my shoes off, I lied back on the bed. When my head hit the pillow, I crossed my hands on my stomach and began to doze off.

"Are you seriously going to sleep again?" I heard Josh ask me. I could feel that he was leaning over the pillow barrier, disregarding it's purpose.

"That's what I'm about to do," Ian said.

"You already slept on the bus this morning," Josh told me, completely ignoring Ian.

"Wake me up when we need to go," I replied, keeping my eyes closed.

Josh didn't reply and soon a comfortable slumber consumed me.

Later on, I woke up to Josh and Fox talking. I rolled over on the bed, hoping to get some more rest before the game. Fox laughed at something Josh said and the sound was like a melody.

He was always so serious, but when he let himself calm down for a moment, I realized the true him was softer than he wanted to let on. His laugh was smooth and melodic. It reminded me of honey, sweet and something that would stick with you. Even if I never heard it again, I would remember that sound.

I sat up in bed, stretching my arms above my head and let out a long yawn, my jaw aching from being open so wide.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty," Josh sarcastically remarked.

"What time is it?" I rasped, feeling around the bed for my phone and not finding it.

"Almost four. We need to go catch an early dinner soon. Coach doesn't want us eating too close to game time."

Instead of answering him, I got out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. After I was done in there, Fox and Josh had woken up Ian and the three of them seemed as if they were ready to head down to the lobby to meet the team for our meal.

When we met up with the rest of the team, we got a table with Ryan, Jude, Alex, and Liam who were all rooming with each other. Ryan looked around the room, as if making sure no one was around to hear us, before motioning for us to lean in at the table so he could tell us something.

"We're going to the pool tonight after the coaches go to bed," Ryan excitedly whispered, looking around at all of us to see our reactions.

"Yes!" Alex nearly shouted, but he was shushed by Jude.

"Are we really supposed to do that?" I asked quietly, giving Ryan and confused look.

"It's tradition, Ellis," Ryan told me in an amused tone.

"Silva and Merton are dead asleep by like ten o'clock the latest," Jude informed me with a chuckle.

"So you do this whenever you're at a hotel?" I asked to no one in particular.

Ryan nodded. "We usually have another dinner after the game and then the coaches pretty much leave us alone."

"Even grumpy gills over there comes with us," Alex joked, pointing his finger toward Fox who just scowled and flipped him off.

While I wasn't too keen on hanging around with Fox and his friends after hockey, I was slightly intrigued by their plan of going to the pool later on.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

***

After winning the game 3-1, the team headed back to the hotel. Fox, Ian, Josh and I made our way up to our room to get changed and go down to our late dinner with the team. Since I didn't shower at the locker rooms, I opted to shower at the hotel before dinner.

"Do you want us to wait for you?" Josh asked as I stood in the doorway of the bathroom.

I shook my head. "No, I'll meet you down there."

And with that, Josh nodded and I shut the door to the bathroom so I could take my shower. I didn't take long, just washing up a bit with soap. When I got out, I got dressed and quickly towel dried my hair.

After stepping out of the bathroom, I noticed Fox was sitting outside on the balcony attached to our room. Before I could stop myself, I was walking to the balcony and stepping outside, sliding the door shut behind me.

"Aren't you coming to dinner?" I asked after a few moments of silence. Fox didn't even acknowledge me when I walked onto the balcony.

"No."

I sat down in the chair beside him, giving him a confused look.

"You can leave now," he spat, sending me a malicious glare.

"I still don't understand why you have such a huge problem with me," I shot back, my voice matching his.

Fox was the one person on this team I could truly relate to and it bothered me that the two of us were at odds. He seemed too closed off to have much of a connection with anyone. He was a flame, intent on burning me if I got too close.

"I don't have a problem with you."

I scoffed at his words and shook my head, staring out at the view in front of us. The town was lit up, the lights of homes resembling the stars in the sky.

If only I could wish on these stars.

"That's bullshit," I said in a throaty tone, my voice coming out raspier than I intended.

Fox didn't answer, his silence telling me all I needed to know. Instead of sitting out here in silence with someone who would rather cut his tongue out than speak to me, I stood up and reached out to pull the patio door open. Only when I tugged on the handle, it wouldn't budge. I forcefully pulled the handle again and again, but it still wouldn't open.

"Uh... Fox?" I trailed, my voice panicked as my stomach fell to my feet.

"What?" he snapped, whipping his head toward me.

"The door won't open."

Fox immediately shot up from his seat and shoved me away from the door to pull on it himself. The door still wouldn't budge, even with Fox tearing at it like his life depended on it. Maybe it did. I was sure I was the last person on earth he wanted to be stuck out here with.

"Call Josh," Fox demanded as he pulled on the door again.

I patted my pockets for my phone and my eyes widened when I realized it wasn't there. I stepped closer to the sliding door and looked inside to see my cell phone comfortably sitting on the nightstand beside my bed.

"Um, can you call Josh?" I timidly asked.

"My phone is inside charging. Just call him."

I let out a heavy sigh and pulled my hand down my face in frustration.

"My phone is inside," I apprehensively admitted.

Fox slowly turned toward me, his gaze dark and his eyes wide in panic. His skin paled slightly as he looked at me and realized I was being dead serious.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he seethed, his hands going up to his head and pulling on his hair. "This wouldn't have happened if you didn't come out here!"

"Don't blame this on me," I argued. "How was I supposed to know the door wouldn't open?"

"You shouldn't have even come out here," Fox replied argumentatively.

"Yeah, then you'd be stuck out here by yourself."

"I'd rather be stuck out here alone than with you," Fox spat before returning to his seat and crossing his arms over his chest, pulling his jacket closer to his body.

"That makes it sound like you have a problem with me," I retorted sardonically, reclaiming my seat beside him.

Fox didn't answer me verbally, but I could feel the heat from his scowl singe my skin from where he sat.

I didn't want to admit to myself that I needed Fox, but I couldn't help but feel like I did. In a place where I felt like I didn't belong, he was my only sense of familiarity. He was the only guy on the team I could relate to and if I ever wanted to feel like I belonged here, I needed his approval. No matter how painful it was to admit it, even only to myself.

"You know I would never out you, right?" I asked him with a serious expression on my face. "Like no matter how you treat me, I won't do it."

His gaze softened slightly, but he was still guarded as if he didn't believe I was being sincere. It was the first time I truly saw the walls he had built up around him. I would never describe Fox as afraid, but his look told me he was wary of continuing this conversation with me.

"Do you regret it?" Fox asked in a soft tone.

"Regret what?"

"Coming out," he answered. "You've had to take a ton of shit for it."

I pondered on the thought for a moment. Obviously, coming out caused a great deal of complications in my life. I was cast out from my home, from my team, and from my friends. However, I wasn't any happier with myself before coming out than I was now. I hated hiding who I was. It was like the real me was watching my life from the sidelines, eagerly waiting to get a turn but never getting the chance. It gave me a feeling of emptiness, like I was living somebody else's life and no my own.

"No," I finally answered him, shaking my head while looking out at the city.

"Seriously?" he wondered in a light tone, tilting his head to the side with a troubled look on his face. Although he was questioning me, it didn't feel as though he was judging, just stunned as if he couldn't imagine how I was actually okay with how my life had been going.

I stretched my legs out and crossed my right ankle over my left before turning to glance at Fox who was already looking at me. Part of me didn't want to get into my feelings with him, but I still wanted him to accept me.

"I mean, it sucks sometimes, having everyone know," I admitted, clearing my throat. "But it was tiring hiding that part of me. I couldn't do it anymore. Even if it meant losing everything, it was worth it."

The icy wind blew, causing goosebumps to form on my arms. The cold temperature seemed to match the mood of this conversation, formal and stiff without any comfort. My hands snaked up my arms to rub them, trying to produce some warmth. A movement from Fox caught my attention as he stood up and took his jacket off, revealing his sweatshirt underneath, and threw it at me.

"Thanks," I said as I stuck my arms in the jacket and zipped it up. Fox was slightly larger than me, but the jacket fit fine.

"I'm sorry for what I said the other day," Fox suddenly apologized after sitting back down in his chair. "I know you don't have it easy."

"It's alright," I assured him with a timid smile.

"And I'm sorry for treating you like shit since you got here," Fox added with a sigh. The look on his face and the sound of his voice didn't match his apologies, but I had a feeling that was only because he wasn't used to apologizing.

"What's with the change of heart?" I teased, trying to mask the slight discomfort I felt.

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe I just realized that you have enough shit to deal with without me making it any worse. I'm supposed to be the captain and that means looking out for all of you."

A genuine smile broke out on my face. The wind blew again, but with the protection of Fox's jacket, my body didn't feel the icy cold.

"Does this mean we can be friends?" I asked him teasingly, though I wasn't kidding.

Fox scoffed. "Friends?"

I nodded, looking at him to answer me.

"I'll think about it," he responded, causing me to shoot him an agitated look.

The two of us sat in silence for a few moments before I threw my head back and groaned. I didn't know how long the two of us had been out there, but it felt like an eternity.

"I'm going to die of boredom," I whined, looking up at the sky. It was too cloudy to see any stars, so I averted my gaze back to the city lights.

"We've been out here for forty-five minutes, tops," Fox informed me with a judgmental look. "You're impatient."

I nodded in agreement. "I am. We need to do something."

Fox looked at me like I was crazy. "Like what?"

"Would you rather..."

"No," Fox immediately cut me off. "I'm not playing any games with you."

"Come on," I pleaded in a whining tone. "Aren't you bored?"

Fox teasingly smirked. "I was enjoying the silence."

I let out a huff and crossed my arms over my chest in annoyance, also trying to protect my hands from the cold. I heard Fox let out a sigh and say something under his breath.

"Okay, would you rather..." he stopped to think for a moment, "fight off one hundred duck sized horses or one horse sized duck?"

I threw my head back and laughed loudly. "What kind of question is that?"

"An important one."

"Probably the duck sized horses. I'm scared of birds," I admitted through my chuckles.

"Why the hell are you scared of birds?" he asked in a judgmental tone as if my fear was absolutely absurd.

"They just scare me," I told him with a shrug. "Would you rather have a head the size of a grapefruit or the size of a watermelon?" Fox's eyebrows shot up slightly with a wry expression on his face.

"Watermelon," he answered after a few moments.

"Why?"

"Some watermelons are normal head sized," Fox reasoned.

"If you say so."

Fox glared. "Some are."

"Okay," I said, still sounding unconvinced.

Fox rolled his eyes. "You're annoying."

Before I could answer him, the sound of the slider door opening grabbed our attention. The two of us shot up from our seats and turned to see Josh standing in the doorway with a puzzled expression.

"What are you guys doing out here?" he asked.

"Don't close that door!" I exclaimed, making my way over to him and pushing passed him to get inside, Fox following behind me.

Our actions only caused Josh to look even more confused.

"Don't go out there and shut the door because it won't open," Fox warned him, grabbing his phone from the bed side table.

Josh's eyes widened. "You guys were stuck out there?"

"No, we just decided it would be fun to sit out in the cold for over an hour," Fox sarcastically replied.

I took off Fox's jacket and threw it down on his bed, Josh looking at me with concern.

"And you guys are... alright?" Josh questioned, looking at me rather than Fox.

I shrugged. "We're fine."

"Sorry I didn't come sooner. I just assumed maybe you fell asleep again," Josh said, looking guilty.

I just nodded, letting him know I wasn't angry with him.

"A bunch of the guys are already down at the pool," Josh told us as he rummaged through his bag, presumably to look for his bathing suit. Fox was lying down on his bed, holding his phone over his face.

"I think I'm just going to go to sleep," I replied, sitting down on the bed.

"No, it's tradition. You're coming. Both of you," Josh demanded, looking at me then over at Fox with a stern expression.

I never knew Josh to be so pushy.

"I don't have a bathing suit," I argued.

"I brought two because I knew you wouldn't bring one," Josh retorted, pulling swim trunks out of his bag and tossing them to me.

How was I supposed to know to bring a bathing suit?

Josh went into the bathroom after telling me to get changed. And soon enough we were all headed to the pool.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

Idk why notifications didn't go out last chapter and idk if some people got them so if you read this can you please tell me if you got a notification for chapter 10 and for this chapter?

Okay, so what did you think about Fox and Elijah making amends? Do you feel like you understand Fox a little better. Do you think Elijah and Fox will become good friends? Let me know what you think!

Thank you.

12

Back on my old team, I could remember the fun of away games and tournaments. Sure, the actual games were fun, but what we did at the hotel was better. Hanging out in each other's rooms and ordering room service at ungodly hours of the night were always highlights of the trips.

Walking to the indoor pool with Josh and Fox brought back fond memories of my old team. Most of the team was already at the pool when we got there and everyone was laughing and having a good time while a game of chicken was going on in the middle of the pool.

I followed Josh and Fox over to a set of chairs where they each put their towels and tore off their shirts. I tried not to let my eyes linger on Fox's defined torso, but he made it hard. I hated him for being so hot. My shirt was off along with their's a few seconds later and I wished I could have said that Fox was looking at *me,* but instead, he was looking down at his phone.

"Come on," Josh said, nodding his head toward the pool.

"Do we really have to go in?" I whined.

"That's the whole point," Josh argued.

Instead of joining in on our conversation, Fox went ahead of us and wordlessly jumped into the pool, splashing everyone around him, including the two of us. While I was slightly annoyed at the action, everyone else cheered and hollered, grabbing onto Fox's shoulders and shaking him as he surfaced.

Fox turned to look at me, pushing his soaking wet hair back on his head. He nodded toward the pool, motioning for me to come in.

I shook my head.

"At least put your feet in," Fox encouraged, swimming over to the edge of the pool closest to me.

I let out a sigh before giving Fox an amused look and humoring him by walking toward the edge of the pool. As I was about to sit down, Fox's hand wrapped around my ankle and he pulled, causing me to tumble into the water on top of him.

Fox grabbed onto my arm and pulled me above the water and I began to uncontrollably cough once I surfaced. The guys around us were cheering and Fox smacked his hand onto my bare back, trying to help subside my coughs. Eventually, I got my breathing to be even and that was when I notice how close I was to Fox. For the first time, I noticed a small scar above his eyebrow which was the only blemish on his otherwise clear face.

"Sorry, dude," Fox apologized, "we had to get you in here somehow."

Before I could reply, Josh jumped into the pool and resurfaced beside me, wildly shaking his head and splashing me in the face with the water that came from his hair. I shoved Josh away from me in annoyance and glared at him before turning back to Fox.

"Or, you could have just let me stay out of the pool," I responded to Fox's earlier statement to which he shook his head.

"If you're going to be my friend, then I'm going to treat you how I treat my friends," Fox reasoned with a shrug. I couldn't help but let a smile creep up on my face.

"So you made up your mind?" I asked him in a happy tone.

Fox rolled his eyes and leaned back to float on his back in the water.

"I guess you could say that," he said.

I lowered myself into the water to hide the smile on my face from Fox. He didn't know his friendship could change the trajectory of how my life here

was going, but I knew that being able to connect with him was going to make it easier.

"Ellis!" Ian exclaimed, causing me to stand and push my soaking wet hair out of my face. "Get on my shoulders."

"What?"

"No, I get Ellis," Alex argued, poking Ian on the shoulder. "He's the easiest one to lift."

Ian rolled his eyes and shoved Alex away from him.

"That's why I called him," Ian rudely retorted.

"I'm not getting on either of your shoulders," I told them, shaking my head.

"C'mon, Ellis," Ian tried to persuade me, walking toward me. "I'm a chicken champion, I need you for a competitive advantage."

"Come on Alex, go on my shoulders. We can beat them," Fox stated with a challenging look in his eye.

With that comment, my mind was made up for me. I walked over to Ian and wordlessly placed my hands on his shoulders. He crouched down in the water so I could get on his shoulders and then stood up, hooking his arms around my legs and gripping me above the knee.

Fox and Alex did the same and suddenly our team gathered around us, shouting and cheering for who they wanted to win. Ryan took the position of referee and stood between us, waiting to give us the go ahead.

"The rules are, there are no rules," Ryan announced with a smirk before motioning for us to begin.

Ian gripped me tighter as he made his way over to Fox and Alex. As soon as we were close enough, I reached out to shove Alex's shoulders. He wavered a bit, but Fox was able to keep him up and the two of us grabbed onto each other's arms and tried to pull each other down. I worked to make myself

immovable, straightening my back so Alex wouldn't be able to use his strength against me.

Ian started moving closer to kick at Fox's legs, which only ended up making it harder for me to stay up to fight against Alex. While Fox and Ian were using their legs against each other, I continued to push forward on Alex. I gave him one last good shove that sent him toppling over, taking Fox with him. The cheers around us grew louder and Ian let go of my legs to throw his fists up in the air out of excitement. He crouched down so I could get off of his shoulders and as soon as I was down, I was being shoved and pat on the back by my teammates.

"No fair!" Alex exclaimed when he surfaced. "You know I'm not good on top!"

I couldn't help but laugh at the unintentional connotation of his words. A few of the guys caught on and gave him a strange look, but Alex didn't seem to notice.

"Josh, grab my phone!" Ryan called out as Josh hopped out of the pool for a drink of water. He dried his hands on a towel before picking Ryan's phone off of the table. "Take a pic of me and the chicken champs."

Before I could protest, Ryan grabbed me around the shoulder with Ian on his other side and Josh took a picture of the three of us, a few of the other guys jumping into the background.

We spent some more time in the pool before deciding to get out. A bunch of us gathered around a few tables just to hang out while we dried off. I sat between Josh and Fox while Ryan was across from me with Alex and Jude, Ian and Liam completing the circle beside each other.

"Ellis, what's your insta?" Ryan asked me, looking up from his phone. "I wanna tag you in this pic."

"I don't have one," I answered, leaning back in my seat. I was met with strange looks by the rest of the guys.

"Who in this day in age doesn't have an Instagram?" Liam rhetorically asked, sharing a look with Alex.

"Well, I have one," I confessed. "I just don't use it."

Social media didn't mix well with the way I had been treated at my old school. Since getting a new phone from my Dad, I hadn't downloaded any of the social media I used to use.

"Why not?" Ryan curiously asked, looking as if he couldn't understand why.

I shifted in my seat, feeling uncomfortable. I didn't want to tell these guys that I stopped using all of my social media because my old friends, and people I didn't even know, started to cyber bully me. They would think I was weak, but I didn't want to see what was written on there because I knew none of it was good. From what I had seen of it, it was unpleasant and would only make me feel bad about myself.

Josh, noticing my discomfort, intervened, "Lay off, Ryan."

Ryan gave me a sympathetic look and that was what made me decide to come clean. I didn't want his sympathy. I wanted to act like it didn't bother me.

"It's fine," I assured them. "I stopped using it when I came out, I just didn't want to deal with the bullshit," I nonchalantly lied with a shrug.

"I don't blame you," Jude said. "Your old team seems like a bunch of ass hats." They weren't always ass hats, but they definitely were after my coming out.

"We should probably head up to bed," Fox told the guys, standing up from his seat. "If you guys are tired tomorrow for the game, I'm going to kill you."

And with that everyone got up and grabbed our things, heading toward the elevators to get to our rooms. I followed behind Fox with Josh and Ian

beside me and soon enough the four of us were in our hotel room. I changed into a pair of sweatpants, leaving my shirt off, and hopped into bed.

"Next time, me and Elijah get the window bed," Josh warned, pointing a finger at Ian who just rolled his eyes.

"Get over it," Ian retorted, tearing his shirt off and throwing it at Josh.

Fox scolded Ian, telling him to go to sleep, before shutting the light off. That was the end of conversation for the night.

***

After the laid back night we had, the next day hit me like a ton of bricks.

I fell to the ice, a searing pain traveling up my leg. I let out a loud groan and tried to shove myself up off the ice despite the pain. It was late in the third period of the game and we were tied. I had just blocked a shot in front of the net, the puck hitting me in an area of my leg that the pads didn't protect.

I pulled myself onto my knees and stumbled as I tried to get to my feet. The play was finally blown dead when our goalie held onto the puck after stopping another shot. As soon as the play was dead, Fox skated over to me and grabbed me by the arm, allowing me to use him for support, and brought me over to the bench.

"Are you okay?" he asked me as Josh made his way over to us.

I nodded. "I'll be fine, just need a sec."

"You should sit for the rest of the game," Josh suggested as we stopped at the bench.

I shook my head. "I can still play."

"Ellis!" Coach Silva called out, motioning for me to get on the bench. "Sit down and ice that."

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes, but I complied with my coach anyway. Getting hit by a puck hurt, but it wasn't something that was going to keep me from playing. I just needed a break.

Fox and Josh skated back over to the face-off dot near our goal and another defenseman headed out onto the ice to replace me, setting himself up opposite of Ian.

"That was a good block, Elijah," Coach Silva complimented, slapping a hand down on my shoulder and handing me an ice pack. "It just got you in a bad spot."

"I'm fine," I assured him, lifting up my pants to place the ice pack on my leg.

Coach Silva nodded. "I know, I'd just feel better if you sat for a bit."

I wanted to protest, but I wouldn't speak out against my coach. I hated having to sit out when it was supposed to be my shift on the ice, even if the game was almost over.

Throughout the rest of the game, I watched from the end of the bench. The other team scored with about a minute and a half left and our team wasn't able to tie it up again, so we ended our short road trip with a win and a loss. My leg was still sore when we stood up to head to the locker room, but I could walk on it and that was an improvement.

"How's your leg?" Josh asked, catching up to me.

I told him it was better and then we went into the locker room and listened to Coach Silva tell us what parts of our game needed to improve and what we would be doing for practice on Monday.

It was late by the time we got back to the school and Josh drove us home, but Dad and Mindy had waited up for us like I assumed they would.

"How did your games go?" Dad asked as we entered the house. I was about to tell him about our loss, but Josh spoke up before I could say anything.

"Elijah got hurt," he told him to which my father's eyes widened in concern. I sent a nasty glare to Josh, but he ignored me as he walked over to his mother.

"Are you hurt Elijah?" Dad questioned, standing up from the couch and rushing over to me. "Why didn't you call? Why didn't your Coach call?"

"Dad," I groaned. "I just got hit with the puck blocking a shot. It's not a big deal," I assured him. He visibly relaxed when I told him what happened and I sent another glare Josh's way. I hated his big mouth sometimes.

After telling Dad and Mindy about the trip, we all headed upstairs to go to bed. I stopped Josh before he could hide in his room.

"Can you stop telling my dad about every aspect of my life?" I hissed quietly, looking down the hall to make sure Dad and Mindy weren't around.

Josh rolled his eyes. "He worries about you."

"That's exactly why I would rather keep some things to myself," I argued, placing my hands on my hips.

"Listen, Dan is like a dad to me and he asked me to watch out for you and tell him things he needs to know. He needs to know when you're hurt, Elijah," Josh sternly retorted.

I scoffed and shook my head in annoyance, looking up at the ceiling so I wouldn't have to look at him.

"I don't need you to babysit me, I'm not a kid," I angrily seethed.

"Take that up with your dad," Josh shot back before turning to enter his room, leaving me alone in the hallway.

I let out an angry breath and stormed to my own room, shutting the door tightly. Just when I thought this had been a good weekend, something had to come along and ruin it right at the end. It wasn't like I could avoid Josh considering the people on the team I befriended were his friends.

I was starting to think Josh and I would never truly be brothers.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think of the chapter? Did you like the scene at the pool? What about Fox and Elijah's new friendship? And what about the situation with Josh and Elijah?

Let me know!

13

A soft knock on my door sent me shooting out of my bed, fearing I had overslept. It turned out I had, but not by much so I would still be able to make it to school on time. Dad walked in a few moments later, poking his head through the doorway.

"Gotta get ready for school," he told me with a tight smile.

I just nodded and rifled through my dresser for some clothes. Dad had left and shut my door so I would be able to get ready. I noticed a bruise on my leg from where I had been hit with the puck, but I wasn't in pain.

After doing my morning routine, I rushed downstairs to grab something to eat on the way to school. Josh, Mindy, Dad, and Ava all sat in the kitchen as I looked through the cabinets for something to eat.

"Are you ready?" Josh asked me, standing up from his seat at the kitchen table.

Hearing him speak to me immediately soured my mood so I ignored him and continued to look for something for breakfast. I settled on a banana and a granola bar and headed out the door without saying anything to Josh, him following behind me. I heard him sigh as we got into the car. Ensuring he wouldn't talk to me, I put my headphones in my ears and turned on my music.

Once we were at school, the two of us wordlessly parted. No one approached me until I got into my English class just before Ryan, Jude, Ian, and Fox. Ryan stopped at my desk and tapped on it so I would remove my headphones.

"Sit with us," Ryan commanded lightly, motioning his head toward the back of the room where the others were sat.

I looked to the door, thinking of Nadia and Lexa, but quickly decided I would go sit with the guys. It wasn't like Nadia and Lexa paid much attention to me in this class. Following Ryan, I headed to the back of the room and sat beside Jude and in front of Ian.

When our teacher allowed us to begin working on our homework together at the end of class, Ryan, Jude and I turned our desks around to face Ian and Fox so the five of us could work together. I worked on my notes for the reading while the others talked. I wasn't really in the mood to hold a conversation with them.

"You in, Ellis?" Ryan asked, causing me to look up from my notes.

"What?"

"The guys are coming to mine for the Bruins game tonight after practice, you in?" he asked me again.

I shook my head. "No thanks."

My anger at Josh was unintentionally carrying over to the other guys and the last thing I wanted to do was hang out with them tonight, mostly because Josh would be there.

"What?" Fox questioned. "You're not watching the game tonight?"

"No, I am," I answered, closing my book with a sigh and twisting the bracelet on my wrist between my fingers. "By myself, in my room. Alone."

I was met with strange looks from the guys as if they couldn't fathom the idea of me wanting to be alone for the night.

"Are you pissed at us or something?" Fox asked me with an unreadable expression.

I just shook my head and sat back in my seat. None of the guys said anything about it after that and for that, I was grateful.

Part of me felt bad for blowing them off, but I was still mad at Josh that I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself if I had to spend the night with him. My relationship with Josh continued to be strained and his loyalty to my father only made it worse. It was like we were on opposing sides, being forced together but the harder we were pushed, the more we repelled each other.

My mood didn't pick up by the time lunch rolled around. I sat between Lexa and Nadia, who were arguing over me. Across from me, Trevor sent me an apologetic smile while the two girls spat curses at each other.

"Can you two chill out a bit?" Trevor softly asked the two girls. They both sent him harsh glares and directed their anger at him.

"Where's Holly?" I asked, trying to direct the attention away from Trevor to which he sent me an appreciative glance.

Lexa huffed and nodded her head to the other side of the cafeteria.

"Claudia invited her to sit with her today," Lexa grumbled with annoyance evident in her tone.

I looked over to where Lexa motioned and saw Holly sitting next to Claudia with an obvious blush on her cheeks, covering her face with her hands as Claudia whispered something to her.

"Claudia's got that girl wrapped around her finger," Johnny commented, shaking his head in disapproval.

Nadia scoffed. "Fuck off, let her have her fun."

Johnny glared at her. "I didn't say she couldn't have her fun," he argued.

I exchanged a frustrated glance with Trevor before taking a sip of my water. Instead of Nadia and Lexa arguing, we were going to have to deal with Nadia and Johnny spitting insults at each other. I couldn't decide which was worse.

"I'm just sick of you jumping down my throat every time I say something," I heard Johnny nearly yell when I mentally checked back into the

conversation.

"Stop saying ignorant shit and I won't jump down your throat," Nadia said in a final tone with a shrug.

Johnny's scowl looked like it was going to be permanently attached to his face as he looked at Nadia with anger. He shook his head and stood up from the table, taking his tray with him and leaving without another word. Trevor and I each sighed, giving Nadia an annoyed look.

"He's too fucking sensitive," she spat, stabbing her salad harshly with her fork.

Austin, who hadn't said anything since we sat down, had an uncomfortable expression on his face and looked as if he wanted to get up and follow Johnny as he looked at the doors of the cafeteria where he just left.

"I'm, uh, I'm going to go find John," Austin stammered, getting up from the table and grabbing his nearly full tray.

Nadia said something under her breath that I didn't quite catch and continued eating her lunch and the rest of our meal was eaten in silence.

Dealing with the constant arguing of this group was tiring and I didn't know how much longer I could do it.

***

Josh dropped me off at home and almost immediately left for Ryan's after practice, still not saying anything. Not that I really wanted him to speak to me unless it was going to be an apology.

"You're not going out with Josh?" Dad asked as I walked into the living room.

I shook my head. "I didn't feel like it."

He looked as if he wanted to intrude on what I was feeling, but he didn't say anything else. My father worried too much about me and it was beginning

to feel suffocating. His worried expression followed me as I moved to go to the stairs. I let out a sigh and turned to face my father.

"Listen, Dad," I started. "Can you please tell Josh to back off? I don't need him to protect me and it's annoying having him tell you every detail of my life."

Dad looked taken aback at my words, but quickly recovered and the concerned expression returned to his face.

"Elijah, we just want to be sure that you're safe," he consoled.

I groaned. "Dad, I know, but if something is really going wrong *I* will tell you. I don't need Josh telling you every little thing. It's only going to worry you more."

"Elijah..." Dad trailed, seeming uneasy about what I was asking of him.

"Seriously, can you please trust me?" I pleaded. My biggest problem with Josh would be solved if I could get my Dad to tell him to back off. Once that was done, I could try to have a less strained relationship with my step-brother.

"I do trust you, Elijah," Dad assured me. "I just know that you won't want to tell me things that are bothering you."

" *This* is bothering me," I tried to convince him. "This situation is making it hard for Josh and I to even get along."

Dad looked troubled by my confession. I knew he loved Josh like a son and wanted the two of us to love each other like brothers, but we would never get there if Josh kept ratting me out for everything.

He reluctantly nodded. "I'll talk to Josh, tell him to back off a bit."

I let out a relieved sigh. "Thank you."

With that, I turned on my heal and headed up to my room and got comfy in my bed, turning the TV onto the channel of the game. There was still quite a

bit of time before puck drop, but I liked watching the pregame too.

A few moments later, someone barged into my room, causing me to look at my doorway in confusion when I saw that it was Fox.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, sitting up straighter.

Fox shrugged, sitting himself beside me on the bed after shutting my door.

"Wanted to hang," he answered.

"I thought I told you this morning I wanted to watch the game alone," I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest.

Fox rolled his eyes and leaned back on my headboard. "You're just being pissy."

Instead of arguing with Fox, I decided I would just let him stay. After all, he wasn't the one I was angry with and I was trying to be friends with him.

We were silent for a while before the game started, but once it began, Fox was yelling at the TV and cursing under his breath. I found his intensity quite comical, but didn't let him see the faint smile on my face.

Fox groaned loudly and threw his head back. "He can never keep the puck on his fucking stick. I'm sick of him turning it over."

I looked from Fox to the TV to see that the opposing team now had the puck and were moving quickly to our end of the ice.

"Their backcheck sucks," I commented, shaking my head as I watched the Bruins struggle to catch up with the opposing team and allowing them to take a shot.

Fox hummed in agreement and then let out a loud groan along with a curse when the opposing team scored.

"They suck, they fucking suck," Fox raged with a look of anger on his face. I couldn't help but chuckle which caused him to scowl at me and cross his

arms over his chest.

"It's only the beginning of the season," I consoled him with a laugh.

He let out a deep breath. "It's going to be a *long* season if they keep playing like this."

I couldn't help but nod in agreement. It seemed as though the beginning was always the hardest, but I was confident it would pick up and be more entertaining to watch as the season went on.

The rest of the first period went by with Fox cursing at every turnover, offside, and icing before the first intermission was underway.

"So, why aren't you at Ryan's?" I decided to ask him, raising my eyebrows in question.

"Didn't I already tell you I wanted to hang?" Fox replied in a rude tone.

"Yeah, but you could 'hang' at Ryan's with your friends," I countered with a challenging look.

Fox rolled his eyes and sighed. "I meant I wanted to hang with *you* , dumbass," he grumbled.

I would be lying if I said his words didn't cause a jolt of excitement in me. This was all I wanted, to be friends with him. All I did was smile, to which he reluctantly returned. His smile was small and close lipped, but it still showed me his effort in trying to be friends with me.

"Where'd you get the bracelet?" Fox wondered in an almost muffled tone, pointing toward my wrist. I held my wrist up and looked at the bracelet that decorated it as if I had forgotten it was there.

"Oh, Trevor made it for me," I told him with a light smile which only caused Fox to look uncomfortable.

"That kid's in love with you," Fox muttered, shaking his head and turning back toward the TV.

"You sound jealous," I teased with a smirk to which Fox just rolled his eyes.

"You wish," he retorted, still looking straight ahead at the television. Maybe I did wish, but I wasn't about to admit that.

I playfully scoffed. "You think too highly of yourself."

"You would too if you were me," he replied, causing me to laugh loudly. Fox smirked at me, letting out a light chuckle at my amusement.

"But seriously," I started after I finished laughing. "Trevor's just a friend, if that."

"Whatever."

When the game ended with a loss, Fox and I stood up from the bed and went downstairs after I had offered him some food. Dad, Mindy, and Ava were already in their rooms and most likely asleep. Well, aside from Ava. I was sure she stayed up into late hours of the night, but I wouldn't call her out on it.

I pulled open the fridge, with Fox standing behind me, to see what food we had. There wasn't much I was in the mood for, so I pulled out a carton of strawberries and a can of whipped cream.

"Want some fruit?" I asked him, holding up the strawberries. Fox just nodded and I got to cutting them up and putting them in two separate bowls before spraying whipped cream on top.

Fox gave me a strange look, his eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

"You know putting that shit on top kinda defeats the purpose of a healthy snack?" Fox commented, pointing at the mountain of whipped cream in my bowl.

I shrugged. "I never said I was going for a healthy snack," I answered, holding the can out to offer it to him. He stared at it for a moment before taking it out of my hand and spraying some on top of his own fruit.

"Don't tell the guys about this. They think I follow my diet during the season," he warned, his eyebrows raised as if waiting for me to swear to secrecy.

I laughed, shoving a spoonful of whipped cream into my mouth. "No one *actually* follows their diet all season long. I can do it for, maybe, two weeks tops."

"That's because you're weak," Fox teased, pointing at me with his spoon before dipping it into his bowl and getting himself a mouthful of whipped cream.

Not even a second later, the front door opened and shut and footsteps made their way down the hall and into the kitchen to reveal Josh. When he saw Fox and I sitting at the table, he glanced at us with a look of confusion, his face pinched together.

"This is where you've been all night?" Josh asked Fox, ignoring me in the process.

Fox shrugged. "I guess."

Josh hesitantly nodded, looking at me briefly before quickly diverting his gaze. He told us goodnight before scurrying up the stairs to his room.

"Is there somethin' goin' on with you two?" Fox asked, his voice muffled by his food filled mouth.

I didn't want to get into it with Fox about Josh. All it would do was put me in a bad mood and I didn't want anything to ruin this surprisingly enjoyable night.

I shook my head. "Nah, we're good."

Fox looked as if he didn't believe me, but he didn't push further and I was grateful for that. Spending time with Fox had put me into a better mood and I was excited to explore our friendship further.

Maybe he would be what helped me find my sense of belonging here.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think of the chapter? Elijah's talk with his dad? Fox watching the game with Elijah? How do you feel about their new friendship?

Also, I wasn't really planning on making a cast but if enough people want me to I will. So let me know here if you want one.

14

The week went by quickly with the team winning our hockey game on Thursday night. Luckily for us, we had the weekend off and although I loved the game, I was happy to have a weekend to not have to worry about hockey or school.

Josh and I still hadn't spoken much, but I was able to get the car from him for the weekend, so that I was able to pick up Fox from his house on Saturday afternoon, him insisting the two of us hang out. I wasn't complaining. I was just glad to be able to be around someone who didn't annoy me the whole time.

"I think I understand why you don't usually drive," Fox commented, holding onto the handle above his seat.

I didn't think I was a bad driver, but apparently Fox had other ideas about my driving.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a pot hole right there," he warned instead of answering me, pointing toward an area in the road.

Before I had the chance to dodge the pot hole, I hit it straight on, causing the car to shake. I let a timid, embarrassed smile creep on my face as I glanced at Fox briefly who wore a slightly irritated but also frightened expression.

"Keep your eyes on the road," he commanded, causing me to turn my gaze away from him. "I guess it's true that gays really can't drive," he mumbled.

"Does that mean you can't drive either?" I asked him with a teasing smile as I pulled into the parking lot of our destination.

He gave me a deadpanned look before morphing it into a sarcastic smile and exaggeratedly nodding his head.

"Funny," he bitterly replied, opening the car door and getting out.

I chuckled, following him out of the car and into the restaurant. It was just a casual place, nothing special. Fox decided he wanted to eat here today and invited me to go with him. At first I didn't realize he meant just the two of us, but when he clarified that it would be just me and him, I was pleasantly surprised.

We sat down at a table near the back of the restaurant and began to look through the menus. The food was fairly cheap and the options were typical of what you would expect at a diner. The waiter came to us quickly and took our orders before leaving Fox and I alone.

"Wanna go to my place after this?" Fox asked, sipping his water through his straw.

"Sure," I nonchalantly replied, hiding my excitement. I couldn't let it show that I was overly excited to be spending time with Fox. That would surely scare him off.

When the food came out, Fox immediately dove right into his big juicy burger and practically moaned at the taste of it.

"Don't tell anyone how I've been eating," he warned with his mouth full.

I chuckled, taking a bite of my own sandwich. "You keep eating like this and I'll be faster than you on the ice."

Fox scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Please, you skate like you have lead in your shoes."

I sent him an offended look, my mouth agape. "That's rude and not true at all."

"Whatever you say."

I shook my head at him, about to argue with him further, but my words were caught in my throat when I caught sight of someone I thought I'd never have to see again. My mother's husband, Dave, along with some other men from church. They were probably grabbing lunch together after having volunteered to clean the church today. People from the church all rotated Saturdays that they would volunteer.

"Shit," I cursed, tilting my head down so I could shield my face.

"What?" Fox asked through a muffled voice.

"Nothing, nothing," I muttered, continuing to look down at my plate.

Fox turned to look behind him to see what had grabbed my attention and I cursed at him, hitting his hand that was resting on the table.

"Don't look, idiot!" I forcefully whispered.

"Don't look at the guy that's walking over here?" Fox asked in an amused tone, causing my head to shoot up to see that Dave was in fact walking over to us. And he didn't look happy.

"Elijah," Dave said as if my name was cursed. To him, it probably was. "Your mother has been trying to contact you and she is not happy that you haven't been responding."

Dave stood in front of us with his arms crossed over his chest, looking as if he was chastising me as if he had any business doing so. My mouth was dry and I made no move to respond to him. I wouldn't have been able to even if I tried.

"Elijah..." Dave trailed in a warning tone, looking angrier by the second. "I won't have you disrespect me or your mother."

Still, I said nothing. I just blankly stared at him.

"You're the one being disrespectful," Fox spoke up in an offensive tone, his expression challenging and defiant.

"Excuse me, young man?" Dave retorted, shifting his gaze to Fox.

"You heard me," Fox replied, his eyebrows raised in a confrontational manner. "Coming over here and interrupting our lunch is rude, old man."

I looked at Fox in shock with a hint of dread. Dave wasn't a particularly easy going guy and I was worried this would cause a scene.

"That is not how you talk to your elders," Dave scolded, glaring down at Fox who just rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Fuck off," Fox spat, shaking his head and picking up his burger to take a bite.

Dave's eyes bugged out of his head at Fox's vulgar language, but before he could blow up, one of his church friends came up behind him. He was my old best friend, Micah's, father. He came up behind Dave and placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him down.

"Let's just go, Dave, the food is ready," he urged him. Dave listened and wordlessly walked away from our table.

Micah's father looked at me with an unreadable expression before saying, "I'll continue praying for you, Elijah."

The words sent a jolt in my chest because I knew what they meant. He would continue praying that I would somehow end up straight because in his eyes, I was a walking sin.

Fox loudly scoffed and glared at the man. "You can fuck off too." And with that, Micah's father walked away.

Fox and I didn't discuss the incident for the rest of the afternoon.

***

"I'm never letting you drive me anywhere ever again," Fox told me after we pulled up to his house.

"I hit *one* curb," I argued, following him up the walkway to his home.

"I would prefer if you hit none."

All I could do was roll my eyes as I waited for him to unlock the door. I notice this morning when I picked him up that Fox's house was bigger than I expected it to be. It wasn't a mansion, but it was big enough for a big family. My suspicions about him having a big family were proven to be true when I saw a large family portrait in the living room.

"Are those all your siblings?" I asked him, pointing to the portrait. Fox looked to where I was pointing and nodded.

"Yeah," he blandly replied.

My mouth was gaped, still surprised at my recent revelation. There were six siblings in the photo all together, four boys and two girls. Fox looked to be somewhere in the middle of the age range between the siblings.

"Do any of them go to our school?" I asked as I sat down with Fox on the couch as he turned on the TV and started flipping through the channels.

He shook his head. "No, my three older siblings are in college and the two younger ones are in middle school."

I nodded, still intrigued by these Ridley siblings that Fox had never mentioned before.

"Do they all live here?" I asked, looking at all the other pictures around the room.

Fox glared at me. "What is this? Twenty fucking questions?"

"I'm just curious, apparently you're mysterious," I defended myself, giving him a teasing look.

Fox let out an exasperated sigh, running his hand through his dark hair.

"And apparently you're annoying," he retorted in a quiet tone.

I shot him an amused smile and lightly nudged his arm before turning to the TV that he continued to change the channel on. After finally settling on a movie, the two of us watched the television in silence for a while until the front door opened and a beautiful woman, that appeared to be Fox's mother, walked in with a young girl by her side. I recognized the two of them from the portrait in the room. Fox didn't even look away from the TV to greet them.

"Fox? Who's this?" the woman asked kindly, setting down her shopping bags on one of the chairs.

"I'm Elijah," I introduced myself with a smile.

"Oh, you must be the new boy on the hockey team!" the woman replied. "I'm Fox's mother, Vanessa and this is my daughter, Fawn."

Fawn waved at me in a greeting but didn't say anything as she walked across the room to sit on the other side of her brother. I finished exchanging pleasantries with Vanessa as she sat down on a chair facing the TV.

"So, what are you two up to today?" Vanessa asked, directing the question more toward her son.

Fox shrugged. "Probably gonna hang out with the guys later. I don't know."

"Wren's supposed to be stopping by later," Vanessa told him as if she was warning him.

He scoffed. "Then I'll make sure I'm not here."

Vanessa sent her son an annoyed look, but didn't say anything, probably because I was here.

"Are all of you guys named after animals?" I asked to lighten the mood when the thought came to my head. Fox begrudgingly nodded while his other nodded enthusiastically. I smiled at her and said, "That's so cool."

Fox let out a humorless laugh. "No, it's not."

"Oh, shut up Fox," Vanessa responded, rolling her eyes. "Don't disrespect my creativity."

"Your creativity should be channeled into your hobbies, not naming your children," Fox retorted.

"One of my hobbies is naming my children, that's why I had so many!" Vanessa joked, eliciting a laugh from me and matching looks of disgust from her son and daughter.

"We don't need to hear about that," Fawn spoke up, causing Fox to nod in agreement and hold his fist out for his sister to bump. She snickered and bumped his fist lightly while Vanessa shook her head and tisked at her children.

Eventually, Fox and I were left alone again in the living room as Vanessa went in the kitchen and Fawn went outside to play with one of the neighbors.

"Hey, Fox," I called out, grabbing his attention away from the TV.

He looked at me with an attentive gaze that almost made me forget what I was going to say. His dark eyes were wide with wonder and his mouth was slightly parted. That was enough for my breath to hitch in my throat.

I awkwardly cleared my throat. "Thanks for earlier at the diner."

He shrugged. "It was just lunch."

I let out a breathy laugh, shaking my head. "I meant with standing up for me. I don't know why, but I just froze."

"Oh, that," Fox replied, scratching the back of his neck and averting his gaze from me. "What was that about anyway? That guy was a douche."

Memories of my mother and my step dad were tainted with painful emotions that I didn't want to get into, especially not with Fox. I didn't want him to see me get emotional like I knew I would. Our friendship wasn't at the level where I felt like I could get into my feelings with him.

"It was just my step dad," I admitted. "He *is* a douche. So thanks."

Fox shook his head, meeting my gaze once again. "You don't have to thank me for that."

All I could do was smile down at my lap, hiding the changing color of my cheeks.

***

Dad and Mindy decided Sunday night was going to be their date night, leaving Josh and I with Ava. The three of us sat down on the couch, Ava between Josh and I, watching a scary movie that our sister had picked out.

"This is fu— messed up," Josh commented, gesturing toward the TV. "Should you even be watching this?"

Ava glared at him. "I've seen it before."

"When?"

"At Kenzie's Halloween party last year."

"Don't her parents supervise you guys?" Josh asked in astonishment, a bewildered look on his face.

Ava scoffed, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyebrows. "Shut up, Josh."

I couldn't help but chuckle at our sister's dismissal of Josh's overbearing attitude. It seemed like we both got tired of the way he treated us like we were babies.

Josh and I both jolted when a sudden jump scare appeared on the screen. Ava was unfazed, muttering something under her breath about the two of us being chickens. My hand was over my chest, feeling my speedy heartbeat. Josh and I exchanged freaked out looks before turning back to the movie.

As soon as the movie ended, Josh sent Ava up to bed, telling her that we had already let her stay up later than our parents wanted us to. She begrudgingly and reluctantly got off the couch and headed up the stairs, but not before sending each of us an annoyed glare. I shook my head at her and chuckled.

Josh groaned and leaned his head back on the couch. "She's going to be so much harder to deal with as a teenager."

"You're just mad she's already cooler than you," I told him with a sardonic expression. I stood up from the couch, ready to head to bed, but Josh stopped me and made me sit back down before I could leave.

"Listen, Dan talked to me the other day," Josh started with a serious expression. "He told me you two talked."

I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"He still wants me to watch out for you," Josh admitted, "but basically told me to back off a bit."

"That's all I want," I replied.

Josh nodded, looking down at his lap for a moment before looking back to me.

"He wants us to be closer or something I guess," Josh awkwardly mumbled.

There was no doubt in my mind that Dad wanted Josh and I to suddenly be best friends. However, I couldn't see that happening.

"So, I'm going to make an effort," Josh told me in a stronger voice. "Will you?"

Dread filled me at his words. Prior to this, I was fine just being casual with Josh and being slightly acquainted with him, but that wasn't going to be an option anymore.

"Sure," I blandly responded. I didn't know what constituted as effort, so I was going to have to wait and see what Josh's effort was.

**

Big thank you to @boredeternally for their amazing cover! I have attached it to the chapter so make sure you check it out!!!

So what did everyone think of the chapter? How do you feel about Fox and Elijah hanging out? What about their run-in with Dave and Fox defending him? And meeting some of Fox's family? Do you think Josh and Elijah will begin to get closer?

Thank you for reading! Let me know what you think!

15

Tension between the GSA kids had dissipated as the week progressed. They were all getting along relatively well enough to go to my hockey game on Friday night. However, they missed out on my Tuesday night game because they were still in an awkward place with each other.

The team was able to pull off two wins this week and I was sure the celebration in the locker room was loud enough to be heard from the outside.

"You going to Ryan's?" Fox asked, standing a few lockers down in front of his own.

I shook my head. "Trevor's."

"We're getting together Saturday night too, come then," Fox suggested, though it sounded more like he was ordering me.

I smiled. "Fine."

Fox rolled his eyes, shutting his locker door. "Okay, man of few words, I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you."

Fox slung his hockey bag on his shoulder and sauntered out of the locker room and I watched him as he went, slicking my wet hair back with my hand. He was like a magnet for my eyes, wherever he went they followed. I tried not to dwell on the way his back muscles looked in his tight shirt.

After Fox left the room, I continued gathering my things before heading out to meet up with the GSA kids. I had already told Josh I was going with them, so I didn't feel the need to wait up for him after the game.

"Great game!" Trevor complimented me with a wide smile as I made my way to his car.

I smiled back. "Thanks, Trev."

"I still don't really get it, but I'm learning," he sheepishly admitted, opening the driver's side door.

I chuckled as I got into the passengers' seat after putting my hockey bag in the back.

"You'll get it eventually," I told him as I buckled my seatbelt.

Trevor hummed in agreement as he started the car and maneuvered out of the parking lot toward his house.

"I thought it was going to be awkward with Claudia there," Trevor confessed, both hands on the wheel as he stopped at a stop sign.

"Claudia came?"

Trevor nodded. "Holly invited her. I thought she was going to be kinda salty since Fox broke up with her, but she doesn't seem bothered by it. She was cheering him on and everything."

I had my suspicions that Fox was the one who broke things off with Claudia, so having that confirmed made sense.

The others were already at Trevor's house waiting for us by the time we got there. Trevor led me inside and as soon as he opened the door, we could hear a commotion coming from the living room. He let out a groan as he rushed toward the sound of the noise.

When I reached the living room after Trevor, I saw that the commotion was the group talking loudly over a game of Cards Against Humanity, bottles of alcohol surrounding them.

"Did you guys take this from the basement?" Trevor asked in a demanding tone, pointing toward the bottles of liquor.

Nadia loudly laughed and shook her head, obviously already drunk. "No, silly. We brought it ourselves."

Trevor sighed and shook his head at her, looking over at Claudia and Holly who were cuddling on the couch, seemingly sober.

Claudia held her hands up in defense. "I tried to tell them not to."

Austin looked as if he was ready to pass out while Johnny looked happier than I had ever seen him and Lexa was asleep on the floor. Nadia and Johnny actually seemed to be getting along, which I had never seen. Maybe the two of them should get drunk more often.

"Play the game with us!" Johnny exclaimed, tugging on my arm. "It's fun."

"No thanks," I replied, moving away from him to sit on the couch next to Holly, Trevor moving to sit beside me.

"Boo!" Nadia yelled with a thumbs down.

"At least they'll sleep good tonight," Trevor mumbled, staring at his friends with a dreadful look.

I chuckled and playfully shook my head as I watched Nadia secretly glanced over at Johnny's cards while he was taking a long sip of beer.

"Good game tonight, Elijah," Claudia spoke up, grabbing my attention.

I turned to face her with a tight lipped smile. "Thanks."

"I guess you are as good as they say," she said with a teasing smile.

All I could do was smile because I had no idea what to say to her. Being around Claudia unsettled me and I couldn't pinpoint exactly why that was.

Trevor had the TV on, but none of us were really paying attention to it. We watched as everyone eventually began to fall asleep on the floor. Austin was the first after Lexa, and Nadia and Johnny were quick to follow. Claudia

and Holly slept on the couch and that left Trevor and I to be the only two awake.

"I didn't think this is how this night would go," Trevor suddenly admitted in a whisper. "They're not usually like this."

I shrugged. "It's better than them fighting."

Trevor laughed and nodded. "That's true."

We sat in silence for a few more moments, the quiet TV being the only sound in the room along with Nadia's light snores. I felt Trevor's eyes on me, but I stayed facing the TV.

"Are you tired?" he asked me.

I shook my head, turning to face him. "Not really."

Trevor bobbed his head lightly in a nod, his eyes never leaving mine. It was like his eyes were trying to tell me something, but I couldn't decipher what it was. They were pulling me in, making it hard for me to look away. Before I could avert my gaze, Trevor leaned in and captured my lips in a kiss.

The kiss was timid and scared, his lips light as a feather on mine almost as if they weren't even touching. It caused a feeling of confusion to consume me and I began to be suffocated by my own dreadful thoughts of the kiss. I pulled away and stared at Trevor with a shocked look. I knew everyone joked about him having a thing for me, I just didn't think it was actually true.

"I... uh..." I trailed, looking anywhere but him and awkwardly scratching the back of my neck.

"I'm sorry," Trevor blurted, looking panicked. "I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's alright," I assured him, "but Trev... I'm not... I'm not ready for anything."

"I know, I'm sorry," he apologized again.

I felt as though I was drowning. Trevor's obvious affections for me were finally catching up with me as I thought back on all of the hints he had dropped since I met him. I wanted to believe that he was being nothing more than friendly, but I was wrong, and now I was stuck in an awkward situation that I didn't want to be in.

"You don't need to apologize," I told him with a sigh. "I should go."

Trevor looked at me with a troubled expression. "You don't need to. We can just forget about it and stay friends, okay?"

I nodded. "Of course we can stay friends," I assured him, "but I was going to go home anyway."

That wasn't a lie. I had never planned on staying the night at Trevor's and now was a good time to leave.

"Okay. Do you need a ride?" he asked, letting out a yawn.

I shook my head. "Get some sleep. I'll call Josh."

"I'm sorry again," Trevor said in a soft voice.

"Don't be," I responded with a smile, though I did feel slightly uncomfortable. I just didn't want to make him feel worse than he already did. "I'll lock up when I leave."

I got up from the couch to call Josh, but at the last second I decided to call Fox. I needed to talk to someone to get out my frustrations and emotions about what had just happened, and there was no way I could talk to Josh about this. We weren't that close and he would just boast and tell me that he knew it would happen eventually.

"What?" Fox answered the phone.

"You still at Ryan's?" I asked him, ignoring his slightly rude tone.

"On my way home now, why?"

"Do you want to pick me up?" I asked in a sickly innocent tone.

Fox sighed. "You still at Trevor's?"

"Yeah."

Fox let out a longer sigh this time. "Send me your location."

I stood in the hallway to wait for Fox, peaking my head in the living room to see that Trevor had made himself comfortable on the couch and looked to be asleep. The kiss was unexpected and left a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. It felt like a sucker punch to the gut and I couldn't shake the feeling.

It wasn't that Trevor wasn't an attractive guy, but I just couldn't see myself wanting anything more with him. Ever.

After what seemed like ages, Fox sent me a text to let me know he was here. I scurried over to the door, making sure to lock it before I left. My hockey bag was still in Trevor's car, but I was sure he'd bring it with him to school on Monday.

"What's got you in such a rush?" Fox confusedly asked, furrowing his eyebrows. I would have thought about how cute that looked if I wasn't so stressed out.

"I just had to get out of there," I told him, buckling my seatbelt.

"Okay... you heading home?"

"No," I quickly denied, shaking my head.

"Where are you headed then?" he wondered.

I sighed. "I don't know."

"Wanna come to mine?" Fox offered, shifting the car into drive.

I enthusiastically nodded and Fox pulled away from the curb to head toward his house. The ride there was quiet apart from when Fox snapped at me to stop bouncing my leg.

"You can sleep in my room or Robin's old room since he's away at school, but it's up on the third floor," Fox told me as I followed him up the stairs. "We kinda have a full house tonight. My brother came home from college for the weekend."

I didn't have to ask to know that Robin must be one of his brothers.

"I'll just sleep with you," I blurted as we got to the top of the stairs.

Fox turned to face me with a coy smirk on his face. I rolled my eyes at him.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," I said with a scoff, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Okay," he said, sounding unconvinced. "But don't act like you haven't put out for me before."

I was surprised Fox was even teasing me about this. Before, he would get angry if I even looked at him in the wrong way. Now, he was casually bringing up the time the two of us hooked up.

All I did was chuckle and follow him as he opened the door to his bedroom. The room was neat and clean, a pleasant surprise when talking about the room of a teenage boy. Hockey trophies lined up on his dresser and medals were pinned to the wall. He even had a framed picture of the team from last season and a cork board hanging on the wall above his desk with pictures of him and his friends pinned to it. I didn't let my eyes linger on the picture of him and Claudia.

Fox sat down on his queen sized bed in the corner of the room, motioning for me to come over. So I did and I sat down beside him.

"So, are you going to tell me why you *had* to leave Trevor's house?" Fox questioned, his eyebrows raised in a way that told me I wasn't going to get

away with *not* telling him.

I let out a long sigh, looking around the room, but Fox grabbed my attention by loudly clearing his throat. I turned to him to see his impatient expression and I sighed again before telling him.

"He kissed me," I admitted, looking down at my lap.

When Fox didn't say anything, I glanced up at him to see that he looked unfazed as if waiting for me to continue.

"That's it?" Fox wondered. "I could've told you that was going to happen eventually."

I glared at him. "Yeah, well I didn't see it coming."

Fox laughed and shook his head at me. "Everyone else did. You're just oblivious and don't listen."

I couldn't exactly pinpoint why, but I grew angry at Fox. I thought talking to him about it would make me feel better, but all it was doing was making me feel stupid. The strange feeling in my stomach came back like an annoying reminder that what Fox said was true.

He must've noticed my sour expression because his expression softened and he looked as if he was battling between being apologetic and being annoyed.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry," he apologized, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I know it must be weird for you, I'm just an ass."

I snorted a laugh and looked at him. "You know what? You are an ass."

Fox playfully rolled his eyes with a small smile on his face.

"So what's wrong with Trevor?" he asked. "He's cute, why don't you just sleep with him or something?"

I rolled my eyes. "There's nothing wrong with him, I just don't like him like that. And you and I both know he's not the type for hook ups, not that I really wanna hook up with him."

"I wouldn't be so sure, I bet he's secretly freaky," Fox teased with a coy smirk.

I shot him an annoyed look and he responded with a faux innocent expression.

"I just don't want to make him feel bad," I mumbled, looking down at my lap.

"Just let him down easy," Fox suggested. "I bet he's sensitive."

"Do I just act like it didn't happen?"

Fox thought about it for a moment before answering, "Just act like it's not a big deal. That way he won't feel bad."

I nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Let's go to sleep, I'm beat," Fox said. I nodded and stood up from the bed, ready to sleep on the floor before he stopped me. "What are you doing?"

"Getting on the floor...?"

Fox scoffed. "You can sleep in the bed."

I wasn't sure I wanted to sleep in the bed with Fox. Although we were friends now, there was still a slight awkwardness about being too close to him because of what we had done together. His face told me he wasn't going to let me sleep on the floor, so I obliged and got back in the bed.

"I just have to go take my contacts out," he told me, standing up from the bed.

"You wear contacts?"

He left the room, not answering me. A few moments later, he came back with black glasses on his face, looking undeniably attractive.

"I like your glasses," I teasingly told him.

"Shut up," he snapped.

He motioned for me to move over toward the wall as he took his glasses off and placed them on his nightstand before turning the light off and climbing into bed beside me.

And soon enough the two of us dozed off.

**

Sorry for the late update. This weekend has been so busy for me and it's only Friday.

Anyway what did you think of the chapter? About Elijah hanging out with the GSA kids? And Trevor kissing him? Were you surprised Elijah called Fox afterward?

Let me know!

Also I did end up making a cast so if you want to look at it, it's posted as the first part of the story.

16

I woke up the next morning with someone's hand tangled in my hair. I lifted my head slightly to look to my side, the hand pulling on my hair. Fox was still asleep next to me, on his stomach with his mouth open facing me. I gripped his wrist to remove his hand from my hair and that caused him to stir awake. He jumped back slightly when he saw me.

"I forgot you were here," he rasped in a sleepy tone. I tried not to swoon at the sound of his morning voice. "What time is it?"

I checked my phone to see that it was just past ten in the morning. I tilted my screen toward him so he could see and once he did, he stood up from the bed and stretched his arms above his head, letting out a long yawn.

"Want to get some breakfast?" Fox asked, turning to face me and nodding his head toward the bedroom door.

I got up from the bed and followed him down the stairs and into the kitchen. Fox opened up the cabinet above the stove and showed me the various boxes of cereal they had. We decided on a cereal just as someone made their way into the kitchen, grabbing our attention.

The guy that walked into the kitchen shared similar features of Fox, making it obvious the two of them were brothers. By the looks of it, they were close in age, though the guy I didn't know seemed a little older.

"I didn't know you came home last night," the guy commented, looking toward his brother with a blank expression. Fox didn't even look at him as he continued to fix our cereal with a clenched jaw.

I looked between the brothers and noticed a palpable tension.

"Oh, excuse me," the guy said to me, holding out his hand for me to shake. "I should introduce myself since I know Mr. Happy over there won't do it. I'm Wren."

I shook his hand with a slight smile. "Elijah."

When I looked back over to Fox, I saw that his jaw was still clenched and he looked as if he was trying his hardest to keep his eyes away from his brother and me.

Wren stared at his brother with an impatient look as if he was waiting to be acknowledged by his brother. I had a feeling he was going to be waiting all day for that. Just as the awkward tension between the two became almost too much to bare, the youngest boy I recognized from the family portrait scurried into the room and started tugging on Wren's arm.

"Let's go," the boy whined.

"Hang on a minute, Colt," Wren lightly hushed him.

At the sound of the younger boy's voice, Fox finally looked over to where Wren stood to see the younger boy and his jaw relaxed as his gaze softened. Colt gave me a confused look before turning to face Fox.

"Wren said he's gonna take me to the park to play basketball. Are you going to come Fox?" Colt asked his brother in a hopeful tone.

"Not today, bud," Fox denied softly, "Some other time, promise."

Colt looked slightly disappointed, but didn't say anything else.

Wren shook his head at Fox and left the kitchen table with a, "Nice to meet you," sent my way. He was out of the room before I could respond.

Colt eyed me up and down before scurrying over to Fox and stealing his bowl of cereal.

"Hey!" Fox protested.

Colt rolled his eyes. "That's what you get for not coming with us." He took a big spoonful of cereal into his mouth before leaving the room.

"What's up with you and Wren?" I asked him once we were alone.

Fox shrugged, handing me a bowl. "Nothing."

My expression showed him I wasn't convinced, but I didn't push him any further. He made it obvious by the way he looked at me that he was done talking about the situation.

"Ryan's having a party tonight," Fox informed me after a few moments of silence, making himself a new bowl of cereal.

"Okay?"

Fox rolled his eyes. "We're going."

"I don't know if I want to do that," I apprehensively answered.

"I'm usually all for bailing on Ryan's get togethers, but I want free booze," he replied with a coy expression, glancing over to me with a smirk.

I let out an exaggerated sigh. "I don't even drink."

"Perfect, you can be my DD," Fox said with a playful smile before letting his expression drop to an apprehensive one. "On second thought... we can just stay at Ryan's."

I gave him an annoyed look. "I'm not a bad driver," I asserted.

"I beg to differ," Fox retorted, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "I'm surprised you didn't pop your tire when you hit that curb."

"I didn't hit it that hard," I argued, crossing my arms over my chest.

Fox sent an unconvinced look my way. "Okay..." he said, pressing his lips together in a tight smile.

After finishing our breakfast, Fox led me back toward his room, saying he wanted to take a shower. Before we could get to the stairs, a loud voice called out his name. We both turned around to look to see a man that appeared to be Fox's father.

"What?" Fox answered, sounding annoyed.

His dad sent him a faux offended look, placing his hand on his chest.

"Excuse me for wanting to see my son after being away for a few days!" his dad shot back, opening his arms for a hug.

Fox rolled his eyes and dragged his feet over to his father who pulled him into a tight hug. I smiled at the exchange, wondering how Fox turned out the way he was when his parents seemed so nice and affectionate.

After his father released him, his dad introduced himself to me as Leo and we exchanged pleasantries.

"Are you boys going to be staying here tonight?" Leo asked us. "I can order you some dinner later."

"Nah, we're going to Ryan's," Fox answered.

"Thank you, though," I said with a polite smile.

After a brief interaction with Leo, Fox led me up to his room and started getting clothes together for after his shower.

"Can you bring me home after so I can change?" I asked, sitting down on his bed.

Fox didn't look up from his dresser. "You can just wear something of mine."

I raised my eyebrows and set my gaze on his back, watching his muscles move as he dug through his drawer. Maybe it was because we had history, but I felt as if wearing his clothes wasn't as innocent as it seemed.

Fox turned and looked at me. "I'm sure you'll fit. It might just be a little big."

I rolled my eyes. "That's not what I was thinking about."

He scoffed. "What were you thinking about then?"

I narrowed my eyes at the back of his head as he turned back to his dresser.

"You don't think it's weird for me to wear your clothes?" I incredulously questioned.

"Why would I?"

Fine, if he was going to act like nothing had ever happened between us, then I would too. He was the one making jokes about it before.

"No reason," I answered with a shrug, creating an impassive expression on my face.

Fox tore his shirt off and threw it in the hamper near his closet before pulling something from his dresser and tossing it at me.

"This'll fit," he told me, pointing toward the plain black shirt beside me. "You can look through my bottom drawer for jeans."

His bare chest made it hard for me to look at his face, though both looked good.

Fox let me know he was going to get in the shower, leaving me alone in his room. I lied back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling with my hands resting on my stomach.

My mind drifted to later tonight and filled me with dread as I thought about it. I was never much of a partier, and I knew it would only be worse since I had no friends.

My dreadful thoughts were interrupted by my phone that started vibrating on the nightstand beside me. It was probably Josh or my Dad. They were the only ones who ever called me.

My eyes widened in surprise when I lifted my head to look at my phone and saw a familiar number on the screen. It was a number I knew by heart, but couldn't bare to save it in my new phone. My mom.

I gave into my curiosity and before I could stop myself, I was sliding my thumb across the screen and answering the phone.

"Hello?" My voice was breathy, shaky, and timid. It matched my apprehension and dread, along with the pit in my stomach.

"Elijah," Mom answered. She sounded as if she didn't expect me to answer, her voice slightly shocked.

"What do you need, Mom?" I asked her after taking a deep breath, trying to swallow my unease and even out my voice.

"Elijah, I want you to come home," she said, sounding serious.

I slowly shook my head before answering, "Mom, I can't."

"Please, honey," she pleaded. "I want to fix this."

"Fix what? Fix our relationship? Or you want to fix me?" I snapped, letting my nerves turn into anger.

She ignored my tone. "I think we can fix this. How about you come over for lunch? I can make you something."

"Ma, I can't," I told her, resting my head back on the wall behind me.

"Tomorrow?" she asked, sounding hopeful yet forceful. She was always used to getting her way.

I sighed and rubbed my temple. "Maybe," I relented.

"Let me know. I hope to see you, Elijah." And with that, she hung up.

I let out another sigh and took the phone away from my ear, staring at the blank screen for a few moments before throwing it down on the bed in frustration. I hated that the woman who threw me out of her home without a second thought still had a place in my heart. She didn't deserve to be there, but she was in the spot that was reserved for mothers and I never stopped loving her, even when it seemed like she stopped loving me.

My mind was caught between the hope my heart was giving me and the cynicism from my brain. There was a very slim chance that she had actually changed her mind about my sexuality, but I found myself believing in that chance just because it would be my ideal situation.

I felt dizzy as I thought of best and worst case scenarios of visiting my mother. The thoughts made my stomach queasy and I decided all I wanted to do was forget about it until tomorrow. So, I stood up from Fox's bed and tore open the bottom drawer of his dresser to find a pair of jeans. Once I found a pair, I pulled my pants off of my legs and changed into his, rolling the ankles due to the pants being too long.

Fox waltzed back into the room a few moments later dressed in the clothes he brought to the bathroom with him, running a towel through his wet hair.

"Why are you all pale?" he questioned me with a strange look on his face, quirking an eyebrow up.

"I'm not," I denied, trying to keep my voice even and my face impassive.

He scoffed. "Whatever, liar."

I didn't comment, shaking my head at him.

Fox and I didn't do much for the rest of the day. I was too hung up on my Mom and he was irritated with my attitude. We decided to head to Ryan's early and Fox insisted on driving.

"Here," Fox said, tossing me a sweatshirt after he shrugged a jacket on. "It's chilly out."

I didn't say anything as I pulled the hoodie over my head.

When we got to Ryan's, Fox let himself in without knocking as I followed closely behind him. The two of us made our way to the basement where the rest of the group already sat around on the couches.

"About time you two showed up!" Alex exclaimed, smiling over at us.

"Yeah, yeah," Fox replied, waving him off as he went to take a seat.

I stayed standing near the stairs.

"Come sit, Elijah," Ryan offered, waving me over.

I dragged my feet over to the couch and sat down in between Ryan and Alex.

"Ryan invited your buddy Trevor to the party tonight," Alex teased, jabbing my ribs with his elbow.

" *Great,* " I sarcastically replied.

"Why are you wearing Fox's hockey sweatshirt?" Josh asked, an eyebrow raised in confusion.

I looked down at the sweatshirt and saw that the front said "Pine Valley Hockey" and the left shoulder had Fox's name on it along with his hockey number, #19.

I shrugged. "I needed something to change into."

"Didn't you go home last night?"

I shook my head. "I stayed at Fox's."

Josh and I looked over to where Fox sat with Ian and Liam, none of them paying attention to our conversation.

"Since when are you two best friends?" Jude jokingly asked, pointing between Fox and me.

I scoffed. "We're not."

"Hm?" Fox hummed, looking toward Jude.

"You and Elijah are friends now?" Jude repeated to him.

He shrugged. "I guess so."

"You guys have to help me set up the drinks for tonight," Ryan ordered, standing up from the couch. The guys around me all groaned before getting up to follow him to wherever he kept the alcohol.

I got up and followed behind Ian and Fox and when we got to the room Ryan went to, I was shocked, my mouth gaping open. The room he brought us to was filled wall to wall with liquor. There were a bunch of different wines and harder liquors in cases.

Ryan walked over to the corner of the room where there were bags that presumably contained more bottles, and he motioned for us to each take a bag to bring upstairs.

"How did you get this?" I asked as I retrieved a bag from the floor.

"My sister is 21," he said with a smirk. "I gave her the money for it."

The eight of us made our way upstairs to the kitchen and began placing bottles of alcohol on the granite counter tops. Ryan opened the cabinets on the kitchen island and pulled out solo cups, placing them on top of the surface.

"I think we should start now," Ian suggested with a smug smile, eyeing the bottles on the counter.

Ryan rolled his eyes, smacking the back of Ian's head. "Not yet, you need to wait for the party to actually start."

Strangely, I agreed with Ian. All I wanted to do was forget about my mother and whatever she wanted to do to "fix" us. Alcohol would make me forget. It would alter my thoughts so drastically that I wouldn't even have to think about anything until it was out of my system.

The alcohol on the counter seemed to get more and more tempting as the minutes passed me by.

I was ready to pour it down my throat and forget.

**

Thank you everyone for reading and for being patient while I worked through finals!

What did you think about meeting Wren and the tension between him and Fox?
What about Elijah's conversation with his mom? Let me know!

Also, for those of you who like Harry, what's your favorite song from Fine Line?

17

I was drunk.

I sat alone in the corner of the living room with an entire bottle of gin to myself, staring blankly out at the party that was now in full swing.

The music was blaring while people danced and stumbled around. A guy and a girl were making out right in front of me, but I tried to pay them no mind. I didn't want to see that.

Not being able to ignore the gross couple, I stood up from the couch, stumbling a bit as I did, and started toward the kitchen. I swayed as I walked and my surroundings were blurry.

Someone stopped me when I got into the kitchen.

"Did you drink that whole bottle?" the voice asked me.

"No," I slurred, squinting my eyes at the person in front of me. It took me a few seconds to realize it was Ian.

"Kinda looks like you did," Ian accused, pointing toward the bottle.

I lifted the bottle and got a good look at it to see that it was empty.

"Oh."

I slid the empty bottle on a clear part of the counter and started walking further into the kitchen, Ian following me.

"Need more," I muttered, surveying the other alcohol lined up on the counter.

"I don't think you do," Ian interjected, grabbing onto my shoulder.

I shrugged him off, reaching out to grab a new bottle. Ian pulled on my shoulder roughly and forced me to put the bottle down and dragged me away from the kitchen. I tripped over my own feet, falling into him. Even in my hazy state, I could feel the annoyance radiating off of him.

He was dragging me along quickly, causing my stomach to stir. I didn't know how much longer I could last without puking. I closed my eyes as he pulled me, already feeling sick.

After a few moments we stopped and Ian pushed me toward someone, causing me to bump into them.

"Someone needs to take care of his drunk ass and it's not going to be me," Ian said to the person I was now leaning against.

"How much has he had?" It was Fox who said that. I would recognize that voice anywhere.

"At least a whole bottle," Ian replied.

I groaned and opened my eyes to see both of them looking down at me. Fox was holding a cup in one hand while his other was holding me steady. Without thinking about it, I swiped the cup from his hand and downed its contents. I let out a whine when I realized it was only water.

"I thought you were drinking tonight," I slurred, poking his chest with my finger.

"I did earlier," Fox told me with a scoff. "I need to sober up to drive, dumbass."

I let out a huff and stepped away from him, looking around the room. I was about to head back toward the kitchen when someone grabbed onto my wrist and caused me to stop.

"Hey, seriously, you've had enough," Fox chastised me, sending me a stern look.

"I need more before I start to 'member," I complained with a hiccup, rubbing my eye with the back of my hand.

"Remember what?" Fox asked. Ian was looking at me like I was crazy.

"I don't know," I said. "And I want to keep it that way."

I tried walking away again, but Ian stood in front of me and shook his head. Before I could argue with him, a wave of nausea blew through me and I doubled over in pain.

"Hey, is he alright?" I heard Josh say from behind me. His voice was lighter than usual and his words were strung together more than normal, telling me he wasn't sober.

"I think I'm going to get him out of here," Fox told him.

"Have you been drinking?" Josh asked in slurred speech.

"Not since a couple hours ago," Fox told him. "I'm fine."

They exchanged a few more words but I didn't hear them. Fox grabbed onto my arm and tossed it over his shoulder while wrapping his arm around my waist. Then, he dragged me out of the house and eventually out to his car, lightly placing me in the front seat.

He didn't speak to me for the entire ride. Or, if he did, I didn't hear him. I had my head resting against the cool glass window, keeping my eyes closed and willing myself not to throw up.

When Fox got to what I assumed was his house, he dragged me out of the car and into the house, tip toeing so we wouldn't be heard. His plan failed because I dragged my feet, stumbling a bit even though he was holding onto me.

"Fox?" a voice called out.

I heard Fox let it a frustrated groan and he stopped walking, pulling me to stand still.

"Are you drunk?" the voice asked in an accusatory tone.

"Fuck off, Wren," Fox snapped. I groaned at his loud voice.

"Do you understand how irresponsible this is?" Wren shot back.

"Just back off, alright? I don't need you to lecture me."

Fox's voice was cold and irritated, a tone I was all too familiar with.

"Did you seriously drive like this?" Wren accused.

"I'm not drunk!"

"Fox," I groaned, tapping my hand lightly on his stomach to get his attention.

"Are you gonna puke?" he asked me.

I just shrugged, eliciting a sigh from Fox. Without saying anything to his brother, Fox started walking again, presumably toward his room. He practically had to drag me up the stairs as I couldn't see the steps, cursing under his breath every time I tripped. Eventually, he just lifted me to get up the last few stairs before setting me back on the ground when we were at the top.

Fox set me down on his bed and left the room. I opened my eyes, but the light in his room was too bright for me, so I shut them again. Within a few minutes, Fox was back in his room carrying a few bottles of water. He set them down on his night stand and handed one to me.

"Drink this," he commanded lightly.

I groaned, covering my face with my hands.

"Elijah," he said, pulling my hands from my face. "Drink this," he demanded more forcefully this time.

"So demanding..." I mumbled.

He forced me to sit up and then opened the water for me, handing me the bottle. I downed the whole bottle within a few seconds. He handed me another water bottle and I shook my head.

Fox gave me an irritated look. "If you don't hydrate, your hangover is going to be worse."

As I sat up more, a wave of nausea came through and I looked to Fox with a panicked expression. I didn't have to say anything for him to know what I meant and he instantly got me up from the bed and rushed me into the bathroom just in time for me to throw up in the toilet.

The sight and smell of my own vomit made me feel like I had to puke more. Fox flushed the toilet while I still sat in front of it dry heaving.

"Are you good?" he asked me, leaning down to get me to look at him.

"I don't know," I replied, my breaths heavy.

He looked at me with an unreadable expression before turning around to grab a face cloth. He wet the cloth and wrung it out before sitting down on the floor next to me and wiping my face with it. I was so out of it, I couldn't even let myself feel embarrassed that he had to be taking care of me.

"Do you think you'll throw up again?" he questioned softly.

"I don't know."

I didn't feel good at all. It felt like I could throw up at any minute.

"Okay, how about I get you a bucket and you use that if you need it so we can go to sleep?"

I felt myself nodding slightly and that was enough for Fox to stand up, grabbing onto my arms to pull me up with him. He led me back to his room, sitting me down on the bed before grabbing me some clothes to change into.

I was having trouble with getting the sweatshirt off, so I looked to Fox for help. He rolled his eyes at me, but helped me anyway, pulling the sweatshirt and the shirt I had on underneath off at the same time. Then he helped me put on the new shirt.

"You're on your own with the pants," Fox told me, stepping away.

I tried unbuttoning the jeans, but my hands weren't cooperating. I couldn't tell if it was my hands that couldn't do it, or if my vision was so messed up that I couldn't see straight.

"For fucks sake," Fox muttered, walking back over to me.

He slapped my hands away from the button on my pants and undid it himself, pulling the zipper down as well. He pulled me up from the bed so I could stand. I got the pants down to my knees before he had me sit back down so he could yank them off of my legs. He helped me put the sweatpants on and then backed away from the bed.

I giggled, letting out a hiccup. "It's not the first time you've undressed me."

Fox shook his head. "You're like a toddler."

I was too drunk to defend myself or think of a witty response. He left the room briefly and came back with a bucket, placing it down beside me and telling me to use it if I needed to throw up. Then he shut the light off and climbed over me to get to the other side of the bed.

"Thanks Foxy," I said, leaning over to place a kiss on his cheek.

"I swear to God if you throw up on me, it'll be the last thing you do," Fox threatened, grabbing me by the shoulder. "Lie on your side."

Fox moves me to position me on my side so that I was facing away from him. And soon after, I was asleep.

***

My head was pounding.

When I opened my eyes, the sun shining through the blinds caused them to burn and the sensation when straight to my head.

I groaned and turned over so that my face was buried in the pillow just as the bedroom door opened and someone walked in.

"Wake up," Fox commanded, setting a glass down on the nightstand.

"I can't," I mumbled into the pillow.

"I can't understand you," Fox told me, grabbing my shoulder so that I would turn over.

"I said I can't," I croaked in a raspy voice, squinting my eyes to look at him.

"Too bad."

Fox handed me some Advil and gestures toward the glass of water he brought in. I quickly took the pills along with some water, sitting up in the bed. I grabbed my head in my hands, willing it to stop throbbing.

"So, I thought you didn't drink," Fox said in a questioning tone, raising his eyebrow.

"I don't usually," I mumbled.

Fox scoffed, sitting down next to me on the bed. "I could figure that much out. Why did you last night?"

I didn't want to answer him, but knowing Fox he would pester me until I did.

"And don't act like there wasn't a reason, you told me last night that you didn't want to remember something," Fox added in a warning tone.

I groaned. Now, I had to tell him.

"My mom called me yesterday," I admitted with a sigh. "Said she wants me to go over there, that she wants to fix us. Whatever that means."

Fox looked at me with a thoughtful expression, his eyes boring into mine. He looked as if he had been up for a while, no trace of tiredness on his face.

"Okay? Is that a bad thing?"

"I don't know," I murmured. "Probably."

"Why?"

"Because she probably just wants to see if I changed my mind about being gay," I told him with a scowl.

"You're just assuming that," Fox argued. "I bet she misses you."

Yeah, she missed who I was before I came out. She didn't miss the real me. She didn't even know that real me.

"So, why did that make you drink an entire bottle of gin?" Fox pressed further.

"God, Fox. Just leave it alone," I groaned, rubbing my temples with my hands to try to ease the ache.

"I think I deserve some type of explanation since I took care of you last night," Fox shot back.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm sorry you had to do that. It won't happen again."

Fox rolled his eyes. "I don't care about having to take care of you. I care that you decided to drink to deal with whatever emotions you were feeling. That's dangerous."

I was taken aback by what Fox had said. Even when I had friends before I came out, none of them actually cared for me in this way. They would get drunk and do drugs like they were invincible and nobody tried to stop them. Many of them even tried encouraging me to do those things with them.

"It's okay to drink a little to have some fun, but to use it as a way to cope is gonna get you in trouble," Fox added in a stern tone.

"Did I do anything embarrassing?" I worriedly asked, glancing at him through my squinting eyes.

Fox shook his head. "You were just out of it. Like a zombie."

I nodded. At least I didn't go crazy and start stripping on a table or something. The few times I had been drunk, I was unpredictable.

"You should probably call Josh," Fox told me. "He was pretty worried about you last night."

"I will when my head stops pounding," I replied, continuing to rub my temples.

We were silent for a few moments before Fox decided to speak up.

"So, are you going to go?" he asked me, tilting his head to the side.

There was no judgement in his tone, just wonder and curiosity.

"To my mom's?"

He nodded.

"I don't know," I answered with a shrug. "Should I?"

"Would it make you feel any better? If she accepted you?" Fox questioned softly.

I thought about it for a moment. Deep in my mind, I knew there was no way she had changed her opinion about my sexuality. She had always been a devout Christian and even told me that there was no way she could have given birth to a homosexual. But more on the surface, I wanted to believe she could accept me. I wanted her to love me.

"I guess," I finally responded. "But I doubt she will. Like I said, she's probably just checking in to see if I changed."

"Then what's the worst that could happen?" Fox replied. "She makes you leave her house when she finds out you're still gay?"

"So you think I should go?" I asked for clarification.

"If you want a relationship with your mom, I think it's worth a shot," Fox confessed with a shrug.

I slowly nodded, pondering on whether an agreed with him.

I looked up at Fox and saw the way the sun shined in the room from the window behind him, making him glow. His care for me was something I had never received, but it was something I was glad I had. He was no longer like a flame trying to keep me away, it was more like he was a light it my life.

"Hey Fox," I said, grabbing his attention. "Thanks."

He rolled his eyes and shoved my shoulder lightly. "You don't have to thank me."

I did and I would always thank him.

**

Hi everyone. Sorry the update is late. I worked all day and then went Christmas shopping so I haven't had time until now.

Anyway, what did you think of the chapter? About Elijah being drunk and Fox taking care of him? And their conversation about Elijah's mom? Do you think he will/should go?

Let me know! Thanks for reading.

18

I met up with Trevor in the parking lot on Monday morning, my hockey bag still in the backseat of his car. He opened the door and got the bag out, handing it to me.

"Thanks," I said with a tight lipped smile.

Trevor's smile didn't look like the one he usually wore. This one was strained and uncomfortable, not friendly.

I didn't know what to say to him, so I just didn't say anything as the two of us walked into school together. I bid him a quiet goodbye when I left to put my hockey bag in the locker room.

When I made it to English class and sat by Nadia and Lexa, it was clear that neither of them knew about the kiss Trevor and I shared.

"Where did you run off to Friday night?" Nadia asked as I sat down.

"Just went home," I lied.

"Why? We were having fun!" she exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes. "I know, you and Johnny were actually getting along."

Nadia scoffed and looked over at Lexa who just smirked at her and shrugged.

"Don't get used to it," Nadia said with a huff just as my teammates walked into the room together.

Fox let his gaze linger on me longer than the rest and it was like my eyes were glued to his, forcing me to keep eye contact.

"I wonder if any of them are secretly gay," Lexa thought out loud, looking over at where my teammates sat.

My eyes widened and I instantly denied her thought, "No, no. I don't think so."

"I bet at least one of them is," Nadia added, Lexa nodding in agreement.

I just shook my head and took my notebook out of my bag, not speaking to them for the rest of class.

By the time lunch rolled around, I hadn't spoken to any of the GSA kids and I wasn't looking forward to sitting with them. When I walked into the cafeteria and got my lunch, my eyes darted to where the hockey team sat and I made my way over there.

"Mind if I sit here?" I asked, causing the guys to look up at me.

"About time you came to sit with us!" Ryan exclaimed with a wide smile.

I sat down beside Jude and across from Fox. There were a few girls at the table that I didn't recognize, one sitting closely beside Josh who looked as if he was trying not to make eye contact with me.

"You and Trevor get in a fight?" Alex teased, his mouth full of food.

I rolled my eyes and Fox punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Alex complained, rubbing his shoulder.

I chuckled, looking over at Fox, silently thanking him.

"How bad was your hangover yesterday?" Ian asked me, a sneer on his face.

"Brutal."

"Poor Fox had to babysit you," Ian teased.

"Why don't you take care of me like that, Fox?" Alex whined, causing Fox to narrow his eyes at him.

"Because you're more annoying than he is," Fox told him, causing me to smirk over at Alex who let out an exaggerated gasp.

"Don't be like that," Alex whined.

I chuckled at his childish behavior and started eating my lunch. When lunch ended, Fox and I walked out of the cafeteria together and were soon stopped by Claudia in the hallway.

"Fox, I need you," Claudia said in a rushed tone.

Fox's eyes widened, as well as my own.

"What?"

"I kinda told Holly I'd take her ice skating this weekend," Claudia sheepishly admitted.

"You can't ice skate," Fox deadpanned.

"Duh," Claudia resounded exaggeratedly. "I need you to help me so I don't look like a fool in front of her."

Fox rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "You're not going to be able to learn in just a few days."

"You're useless. Elijah, will you help me?" Claudia turned to me with a hopeful look.

I was so focused on the confusion I felt watching the two of them interact that I nodded along before realizing what I was agreeing to.

Claudia squealed and threw her arms around my neck in a hug.

"Thank you! I'm free Wednesday night. Let's do Wednesday night after your practice."

She walked away with a bounce in her step after releasing me.

"Shit," I muttered, shaking my head.

Fox laughed at me to which I returned with a glare.

"You won't be able to teach her. She's *that* bad," he said, still laughing.

"You're coming with me," I told him in a serious tone, my eyebrows raised. "I didn't mean to say yes to her."

"Well, I didn't say yes to her at all," he countered with a smug expression.

I gave him a stern look and he seemed to give in.

"Fine," he relented, "I'll go with you."

While I was relieved I wouldn't have to deal with Claudia on my own, I was wary of being around her and Fox together. Seeing the two of them interact caused a discomfort in my chest.

I didn't like the feeling one bit.

***

"Hey, I want to ask you something," Josh announced, walking into my room as I was doing homework at my desk on Tuesday night.

"Hm?" I hummed, not looking up from my worksheet.

Josh walked over to my desk and shut my textbook, causing me to whine in protest and shoot him a scowl.

"Can it wait?" I asked in an annoyed tone.

Josh ignored me, sitting up on my desk and bracing his arms behind him.

"Your dad's birthday is coming up," he told me.

"I know that," I replied, rolling my eyes. "So is mine, by the way."

Josh waved me off. "His is first."

"Okay? What, do you need ideas on what to get him? Because I have no idea," I told him seriously.

My dad was one of those people that would like anything you got him. I could probably buy him a book of stamps and he would be happy with it.

Josh shook his head. "I just want to see if you're alright with what I want to get him."

"What do you want to get him?"

"Adoption papers."

My eyes widened. "What?"

"I want him to adopt me," Josh repeated, "so he will legally be my father."

"You're going to be eighteen in like, six months," I said, probably sounding rude.

Josh sighed and leaned forward. "I know that, but even then he'll still legally be my dad."

My emotions were mixed. The selfish part of me didn't want to share my dad with Josh in that way, even though I practically already did. I always felt like the two of them were closer than I was with my dad, and this would only further that.

But the more rational part of me knew that they already loved each other like father and son, and this would mean a lot to Dad.

"So, you're asking me if I'm alright with me?" I asked him after a few moments of awkward silence.

Josh nodded. "I already talked to my mom about it. I won't do it if you're not okay with it."

Josh and I shared eye contact for a few moments before I let out a sigh and nodded.

"It's okay with me," I told him, causing a smile to break out on Josh's face.

"You know, this'll mean we're legally brothers," Josh teased, hopping down from my desk.

I snorted out a laugh, shaking my head and looking back down at my homework.

"Alright, that's all I wanted," Josh said with a wave, walking toward my bedroom door. He left the room before I could say anything else to him.

Josh's relationship with my father had me thinking about my own with my mother. There was a time when I was that close with her and it sent daggers through my heart to think that we didn't even speak anymore. It felt like I was missing part of me.

I reached for my phone on the other side of my desk, my hand slightly trembling as I did so, and went to me recent calls. My thumb hovered over my mother's number and wavered before pressing down and calling her. It only rang once before she picked up.

"Elijah?"

"Mom," I rasped, mentally punching myself for thinking this was a good idea.

"Have you decided to come home?" she asked in a hopeful voice.

I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut so tight that I started seeing dots. My mind was conflicted and there was a tug of war between my heart and brain, causing searing pain throughout my body. My heart won and I answered.

"I decided to come see you," I told her. "To talk."

"Oh," she replied, sounding slightly disappointed, but her mood picked back up, "That's great! When will you be over?"

"Sunday afternoon," I replied. I decided it was best that I picked the time, that way I would feel more in control of the situation despite actually feeling powerless.

"Will you be coming to church with us?"

I held back a scoff. "No."

"I wish you would," she urged.

"No," I repeated. "I'm not going there."

Mom let out a sigh. "Fine," she relented, "You can come to church some other time."

That wasn't likely to happen, but I didn't want to argue with her about it any longer.

"I'll make you some lunch when you come
over," Mom said after a few moments of silence.

"Okay."

"I'm glad you called," she told me with a content sigh.

"Yeah..." I trailed. "I gotta go Mom."

"Okay, sweetheart. I'll see you Sunday," she replied.

I bid her a quick goodbye before hanging up the phone and I couldn't help the dreadful,squeezing feeling in the pit of my stomach, squeezing so tightly that it felt as though my stomach had shrunken to the size of my fist.

I hoped this wouldn't turn out to blow up in my face.

***

Wednesday night came too soon.

After hockey practice ended, Fox and I changed out of our hockey equipment and met Claudia, who was waiting for us on the bench.

"Fox," she called out as soon as we made our way back to the rink. "I need your help tying these."

He rolled his eyes but walked over to her anyway, bending down on one knee and propping her skate up so he could lace and tie them. I tried to ignore the sinking feeling in my throat as I watched them.

"God, Claudia. When's the last time you even used these? The blades are fucking dull," Fox hissed in annoyance.

She smacked the side of his head. "Don't yell at me."

"I'm not yelling, I'm just–"

"Just tie my skates," she interjected.

Fox muttered something under his breath but finished lacing and tying her skates anyway.

Instead of watching them, I stepped out onto the ice and began gliding around the rink with my hands in my pockets. I looked over at the bench and saw that Fox was standing on the ice, Claudia tightly holding onto his hand as he guided her.

The sight of them together caused an unpleasant taste in my mouth. I looked down at my feet, shuffling my skates on the ice.

"Hey!" Fox called out, causing me to look up and see him pulling Claudia along as she clung onto him for dear life. "I'm not doing this all alone, get over here."

I sighed and skated over to the two of them with a sullen look on my face.

"No backing out," Fox shot at me, motioning for me to come closer.

Fox moved to let go of Claudia and she let out a shriek in protest.

"Claudia," Fox said in a warning tone.

"You can't let go of me!" she exclaimed, gripping him tighter.

"Just stand on your own!" he yelled back.

I was beginning to understand why the two of them weren't together anymore, but that didn't make me feel any better.

Claudia finally let go of Fox and stood on her own, stumbling a bit as she tried to balance.

"Spread your feet more," Fox told her and she complied, screeching as she slid a little bit. "Come forward."

Claudia held out her hands for me to take. I let out a sigh and grabbed onto both of her hands, skating backwards so I could pull her along.

"You're never going to learn if you just have Elijah pull you around the ice," Fox sighed, following us.

"Leave me alone, you're mean," Claudia shot back. "Elijah is nicer."

I smirked over at Fox. "Yeah, I'm nicer."

Fox stopped and watched us with an irritated look as we continued around the ice.

Claudia chuckled. "He's so easy to annoy."

"I know," I replied with a chuckle. "So, you two dated and he never took you ice skating?"

Claudia threw her head back in laughter. "Oh, he did, but it was always a disaster."

"And he was sweet about it at first," she continued, "but later in our relationship, we stopped going because he got annoyed at how bad I was."

She laughed again, not seeming bothered by talking about her relationship with Fox.

"Fox being sweet?" I joked, suddenly feeling slightly more comfortable around her.

"He can be very sweet," she confirmed, "but he's also an ass. You know how he is."

"Are you going to actually skate or what?" Fox questioned, skating up quickly behind us and startling Claudia.

She jumped back, but I held her up from falling.

"You jerk!" she shouted at him. Fox just laughed and skated away.

Eventually, we got Claudia to skate on her own. She wasn't great at it, but after an hour or so we decided that was all we could teach her and Fox offered to drive me home.

"I called my mom last night," I randomly brought up as I sat in the passengers seat of his car.

"How did that go?" he asked, looking over at me as we still sat in the parking lot.

"Alright, I guess," I muttered. "I'm going to see her on Sunday."

Fox nodded. "That's good."

I sighed and leaned my head back on the head rest. "I don't know if it is."

"Hey," Fox grabbed my attention, reaching out to touch my leg.

I turned my head slightly to look at him.

"It'll be fine," he continued. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"I don't know," I murmured, turning my head to look out the windshield. "I guess I just really want this to work out, for her to accept me, and I'm just worried that it won't."

"I think it's worth a shot," Fox consoled me. "The worst she could do is kick you out of her house. Again."

I looked over at Fox with a slightly amused look to see his teasing expression beaming back at me.

"I guess you're right."

"I am," he assured me, "and if it all blows up, you can call me and I'll come get you."

I tried to hold back a smile but failed, my lips parting slightly to show my teeth.

"Thanks, Fox."

"Didn't I tell you not to thank me?" he asked in an annoyed tone.

I just ignored him and shook my head with a laugh. This friendship was beginning to feel more real than any other I ever had. It caused a warmth in my chest that was so strong I bet it made my skin glow.

And for that, I was grateful.

**

Hey everyone! Thanks for reading!

What did you think about Elijah sitting with the hockey team at lunch? And Josh wanting to be adopted? And what about the scene with Elijah, Fox, and Claudia? Let me know!

Also, I just want to thank everyone who takes time out of their day to read my story and vote/leave nice comments. I work all day and I'm so tired by the time I get home I don't want to do anything but then I come on here and read the comments you left and it motivates me to get the chapter up. I know you have lives outside of reading and I have a life outside of writing so it can be hard sometimes to get the time and motivation to get things done. Kindness can go a long way, so thank you!

19

"I don't like this," Josh told me, shaking his head as he drove down our road.

"I know, I heard you the first four times you said it," I replied in an irritated tone, looking over at him with hooded eyes.

"I just think you should have told your dad," Josh added, almost chastising me.

"I didn't ask what you thought."

Asking Josh to drive me to my mother's house on Sunday afternoon probably wasn't my brightest idea. I would have just driven myself, but Josh insisted that he needed the car today and that he could drive me where I wanted to go.

When he found out I was headed to my mother's, he didn't shy away from telling me how he felt about it. He didn't like my plan to tell my father about it afterwards, but I had sworn him to secrecy.

"Are you trying to move back in with her?" Josh accused, looking over at me briefly as he stopped at a red light.

"No," I denied, looking at him like he was crazy.

After she kicked me out, I didn't think she could do anything to get me to move back in with her. Kicking me out the way she did was irredeemable in that sense. I could forgive her for it, but not enough to go back.

"Is your step dad going to be there?"

"I assume so."

Josh sighed and continued driving toward my destination. We didn't speak for the rest of the ride, but I could tell by the way Josh's jaw twitched that he still had some things to say to me. I didn't encourage him to speak though. I wanted to spare myself from his chastising.

Eventually Josh pulled the car up in front of my old home, and I sat in the car as I looked at the house. Nothing had changed on the outside, but I was sure the inside was unrecognizable. Memories poked at my brain, threatening to puncture the walls I built up to repress them.

"Do you need me to pick you up later?" Josh asked as I opened the door to get out of the car.

I shook my head. "Fox will."

Josh nodded as I shut the car door. I took a deep breath before marching up to the front door and then paused, staring down at the welcome mat.

What do I do at a home that used to be mine? Do I just walk right in like I still lived here? Or do I knock like a stranger?

I decided on knocking, not having the courage to walk in without doing so.

Mom was quick to answer the door, a wide smile taking up her entire face. I held my breath for a moment, the reality of seeing my mother for the first time in months finally setting in.

She looked the same, her dark brown curls were tightly wound and her makeup was done to perfection. She wore an outfit that seemed too formal for our gathering, so I assumed it was what she wore to church.

There was a lump in my throat as I looked at her and I didn't think I would be able to speak. I hadn't let myself think too much about what coming here would do to me emotionally, but I quickly realized that it unsettled me. It felt as though I was in a foreign place that I had never been before. And despite the welcome mat I was standing on, there was nothing welcoming about this place.

"Elijah, come in," Mom insisted, moving aside so I could walk in.

She didn't hug me. She always used to hug me whenever I got home.

"I made some pasta for lunch," she told me as she led me to the dining room. She always refused to eat in the kitchen.

When we walked through the living room, I saw that my senior picture had been taken down from the fireplace along with some other more recent photos of me. Only a few baby pictures remained.

In the dining room, the table was set for three and I almost groaned at the thought of Dave joining us, though I had already suspected he would.

"Are you alright?" Mom asked, moving closer to me. "You seem quiet."

"I'm fine," I finally let out, my voice raspy and unrecognizable.

"Sit, sit," she lightly commanded, gesturing toward the lonesome seat on the other side of the table.

I sat down and Mom quickly scurried into the kitchen and then back into the dining room, bringing the food in with her. She placed some on my plate and then on her's and Dave's and the two of us began eating.

"Dave will be down shortly," she said, lightly patting her mouth with a napkin. "We wanted to talk to you together."

Dread filled me at the though of Dave being part of whatever conversation we were going to have. My mother, I could deal with, but Dave was a different story. Him and I never got along.

"I would prefer speaking to you alone," I quietly told her, looking up from my plate.

She stared at me with a puzzled look. "Whatever you want to say to me, you can say in front of Dave."

"No, I can't," I responded through gritted teeth, already feeling my temper rise.

This wasn't going to go well if I was getting mad after only being here for five minutes.

Mom just looked at me with confusion. I felt something inside me snap, but I tried my hardest to keep my composure.

"Why did you invite me here?" I finally asked, my tone cold.

"We should wait for Dave," Mom replied.

"No," I snapped. "I want to hear what you have to say before he gets here."

"I don't have anything to say," she said. "It's what *we* have to say."

I let out a frustrated sigh and placed my fork down on the table, pushing my plate away from me.

I shouldn't have come here. I should have known that it was *him* who put some thought in her head about "fixing" me.

I was about to get up and leave when Dave walked in, holding some papers in his hand. His face was impassive as he walked around the table to sit beside my mother across from me.

"Now that Dave's here, we can talk," Mom told me with a smile, looking between the two of us. "We want you to come home."

I gave them each an incredulous look, my heart stinging every time it beat.

Dave's expression wasn't even trying to be welcoming like my mother's. He looked as if was about to reprimand me.

"No," I said, causing her face to fall slightly. "I already told you I can't do that."

"We think it would be best for you and your... situation if you came back here," Mom tried to reason, looking over at Dave for confirmation.

"My 'situation?' You mean my sexuality?"

"Your *situation* is something that can be fixed," Dave spoke up.

Mom happily nodded. "We did some research and found out that it's not permanent. If you fix your relationship with God, then you can fix your situation."

My blood ran cold at what my mother's words were insinuating. I wanted nothing more than to get up and leave, but I was frozen in place. My mind was giving my body commands to move, but I stayed still under two scrutinizing gazes.

"We found these places," Dave added, tossing the papers down on the table in front of me.

What I looked at were printed papers for different religious camps that advertised that their facilities repaired relationships with God by "rehabilitating sinful minds." A few even explicitly mentioned sexuality as something they helped "repair."

"These are out of state and the programs are only a few weeks," Mom said, grabbing my attention away from the papers. "We really think you'd benefit from this."

"You want to send me to conversion camp?" I asked in a horrified whisper. My eyes stung with tears that blurred my vision. The stupid look of confusion was back on my mother's face and all I wanted was to wipe it off.

"What?" she asked. "That's not with this is, Elijah."

"Yes it is," I instantly replied, in a low, almost hissing tone.

"No–"

"Yes it is!" I boomed, smacking my hands down on the table and standing up from my seat, hot tears running down my cheeks.

My mother looked horrified with her eyes opened wide while Dave looked furious at my outburst.

"If this is what you want, then at least tell it like it is," I said, my voice still loud.

"Elijah, it's a church camp so you can develop your relationship with God," Mom explained, looking as if she was trying to calm me down. "They won't hurt you there."

"I'm not going," I denied, shaking my head. "You can't make me go there. Dad would never agree to it."

"I don't want to make you do anything," Mom replied, intently staring at me. "I thought you wanted to fix this."

I let out a humorless laugh. "You're fucking insane if you think I'm going there."

"Watch your mouth," Dave barked, standing up from his seat. "Don't speak like that in front of your mother."

I shook my head. "Fuck you. You're both fucking insane. Fuck you both."

A sudden collision to my face sent me stumbling back into the wall, smacking my head against it. It took a few seconds for it to register that Dave had just punched me.

"Dave!" Mom screeched, standing up from her chair. She grasped his arm to stop him from coming toward me.

Warm blood poured out of my nose and the side of my face throbbed in pain. I moved my hand up to my face to feel where he punched and found that it was already swelled up and felt warm to my touch.

"You need to learn respect," Dave seethed, moving forward.

I gave him an evil glare and shook my head, moving away from the wall to walk around him. He grabbed my arm as I walked by.

"Dave, don't," Mom pleaded.

I roughly pulled my arm from his grasp and stormed out of the house, bringing my phone up to my ear to call Fox. I didn't even notice I was crying until the hot tears stung my wounded face.

"What's up?" Fox answered.

"Can you come pick me up?" I sniffled, cursing myself for not being able to keep my composure.

"Are you alright?" he asked, sounding alarmed.

"Fox, please," I begged.

"Send me your location," Fox said, sounding as if he was walking outside.

After he received my location he asked, "Do you want to stay on the phone?"

I shook my head, holding back a sob. "No. I'll see you when you get here."

I hung up the phone and began walking in the direction I knew Fox would be coming from. I brought my hands up to my face, rubbing my eyes with a heels of my hands, causing the throbbing on my bruised face to intensify.

I dragged my feet down the sidewalk, choking back sobs that violently pulled through my chest. I knew going to see my mother wouldn't end well, but I was dumb enough to let myself believe that she would be accepting of me. But instead, the worst happened, and she thought of me as someone who needed to be fixed and that was what hurt the most.

It didn't take long for Fox to pull up next to me, alarm in his eyes as he zeroed in on my face. I sniffled and took a deep breath before sliding into the passenger's seat.

"What the hell happened?" Fox boomed as soon as I was in the car. "Did your mom do this to you?" He gestured toward my bleeding face.

I let out a humorless laugh and shook my head, wiping tears from my eyes.

"Dave did."

Fox's eyes turned the darkest shade I had ever seen them. His jaw was taut and his lips were tightly pressed together. He looked like steam was going to pour out from his ears at any moment.

"Where's the house?" he asked in a deathly quiet tone, looking behind him.

"Fox, don't," I pleaded in a bland tone.

"Don't what? You don't know what I'm going to do."

"You're thinking about going back there and fighting with Dave," I retorted with a knowing look. "I know you."

"You can't just let him get away with hitting you!" Fox exclaimed, looking at me with wide eyes, his expression telling me that he thought I was being crazy.

"I don't even care about that," I mumbled, looking down at my lap just in time to see a tear splash onto my pants. "My mom wants to send me to some conversion therapy camp."

Fox's stony expression turned sympathetic at my words. His jaw slacked and he looked at me with sad eyes, shaking his head. He threw his hand through his hair and let out an exaggerated sigh.

He reached out to touch my face, but I flinched away.

"Let me see it," he commanded, putting his hand on my face.

Fox looked at the wound for a few seconds before shaking his head and taking his hand back.

"Shit," he harshly cursed. "I should have never told you to go there."

I shook my head. "Shut up."

His lips quirked up a bit, but he didn't let himself fully smile. Then, Fox did what I thought he would never do. Fox leaned over the center console and wrapped me in a tight hug. The warmth and comfort I felt in his embrace caused my emotions to come flooding back to me. I buried my face in his shoulder as I cried, a loud sob ripping out of my throat.

Fox comfortingly rubbed my back as I wept. I felt secure in his arms, like nothing could ever get to me as long as he was shielding me. It was the sense of belonging I had been yearning for, it was a feeling of being *home* .

"We have to go to your house and tell your dad," Fox murmured into my ear in a low tone.

"No," I cried.

"Elijah, we have to," Fox urged, continuing his steady pace while rubbing circles on my back. "He needs to know some man hit his son. That's kinda a big deal."

"I know, it's just..." I sighed, "He's going to get so angry."

"As he should."

"Can we just go to your place for a little bit?" I asked, picking my head up from his shoulder.

Fox looked down at me and his expression said that he was contemplating my request.

He shook his head. "I think the sooner your dad knows about this, the better."

I studied his sympathetic expression and let my eyes linger to the scar on his eyebrow. My eyebrows pinched together in confusion.

"How did you get that?" I asked him.

"What?"

"The scar on your eyebrow," I clarified.

Fox's expression soured. "Fighting with Wren when we were kids," he told me with a sigh.

"What happened?"

"We were fighting, he pushed me down face first into the corner of the coffee table," Fox explained with a shrug. "There was so much blood. My mom was freaking out she thought I was going to lose my eye, but it was just a deep cut."

I hummed in understanding, nodding my head, resting my head back on his shoulder.

"Okay, now that you're done trying to distract me, let's head to your house," Fox said in a knowing tone.

I sighed and pulled away from him, wiping some stray tears from my eyes. Fox looked at me for a few moments with an unreadable expression before reaching over and wiping his thumb under my eye.

I didn't dare thank him, but I let my expression show him that I was grateful.

Fox pulled away from the curb and we made our way to my house. The ride there was silent, not even the radio was on. My nerves caused an uncomfortable ache in my stomach that matched the throbbing on my face. I looked over at Fox and noticed a red spot on his shirt.

"I got a little blood on your shirt," I told him, pointing toward the spot.

He just shrugged. "I can wash it."

When we finally reached my house, I noticed that both Dad and Mindy were home.

"Do you want me to come in with you?" Fox asked after he parked the car at the curb.

I couldn't even get a word out so I just nodded and then the two of us made our way up to the house. Once we were inside, it was quiet.

"Dad?" I called out.

"Just a minute, Elijah!" he called back. A few moments later he was jogging up the basement steps and walking into the living room.

The wide smile on his face was quickly wiped away when he got a good look at me. His gaze switched from me to Fox and back to me within two seconds.

"What's going on? Are you alright?" he questioned, rushing over to me. Dad took my face in his hands to examine my wound.

"I went to see Mom today," I admitted.

Dad's face darkened as he slightly pulled away from me, keeping his hands on my face.

"Did Dave do this to you?" he asked in an icy tone.

I let out a sigh and rehashed everything that happened while I was at my mother's. Dad intently listened, his gaze never leaving mine as he spoke. When I was finished, the explosion happened.

"I'm going over there right now," Dad seethed, moving to grab his car keys from the hook they hung on.

"Dad, don't," I pleaded, but he didn't listen.

I looked to Fox for help, but he just shrugged.

"I'm not letting them get away with this Elijah," Dad sternly told me. "Both of their actions were uncalled for."

I wanted to stop him, but Fox grabbed a hold of my shoulder. I turned and gave him a scowl.

"Just let him go," Fox said.

And the two of us watched as my father stormed out of the house.

**

Hey everyone. Thanks for reading?

What did you think about the chapter. Thoughts on Elijah's visit with his mom? And Fox picking him up? And his Dad's reaction?

Let me know!

20

Dad didn't say anything when he came home Sunday evening. He was oddly quiet and calm, not what I'd expect from him just coming home from my mother's. Even without the situation at hand, their relationship was strained.

After I cleaned off my face and grabbed some ice for my swollen skin, Fox and I sat in the living room waiting for my father to return. He hadn't been gone long, but I was still nervous about what might have went on.

"Dad?" I timidly called out as he sat down on the recliner.

"Hm?" he hummed, looking over at me.

"What happened?"

He sighed, looking to Fox and then back at me as if debating whether he should say anything in front of him. I nodded, assuring him he could speak in front of Fox.

Dad sighed. "Your mother is not allowed to contact you anymore. If she does, you need to tell me."

I nodded in agreement. I assumed he would do something like that, and at the moment it didn't bother me too much.

"And I'm pressing charges against Dave," he added.

I groaned, pressing the ice harder against my face. I exchanged a look with Fox, who had an emotionless expression on his face, before looking back at my father.

"You don't need to do that," I told him.

"He assaulted you," Dad retorted, raising his eyebrows.

"Please," I pleaded, "I don't want to deal with going to court or whatever."

"You probably won't have to," Dad assured me. "He'll probably just end up with a fine."

I was about to argue with him further, but Fox put his hand on my shoulder, signaling for me to stop. I knew I wasn't going to win this argument with my father. He cared too much for me to let Dave get away scot-free.

"Then what's the point of pressing charges?" I asked with a pleading look.

"To send a message that I'm not going to let him get away with touching my kid," Dad seethed in a low tone.

I had never seen him look so angry. He was always such a laid back guy, but I watched as he huffed and puffed in anger, not even looking like himself. Dad glanced over at me and his face softened.

"Are you alright, Elijah?" he asked me, glancing toward the ice I was holding up to my face.

I sighed. "I'm fine." I stood up from the couch and looked down at Fox. "I'm going to just head to bed."

Fox nodded and stood up as well.

"Keep icing that," Fox told me with a stern look before moving to leave the living room. Dad pulled him to the side and said something to him too quiet for me to hear as I was already heading toward the stairs.

The next morning, I got a good look at myself in the mirror to see that the side of my nose was swollen and underneath my eye was bruised. There was still a dull ache in the area of my wound, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it was yesterday.

When I went downstairs, I was met with three pairs of wide eyes. Mindy looked as if my father had already told her about what happened, but Josh and Ava looked completely shocked when they saw my bruised face.

"What the hell?" Josh asked, pointing toward me. Mindy slapped him lightly on the shoulder and shook her head at both of her children, Ava looking as if she was going to speak up as well.

I didn't want to discuss what happened with any of them, so I just walked through the kitchen to get myself some breakfast, not paying their intrusive stares.

Josh didn't say anything else to me until the two of us were alone in his car. He turned the radio down and looked at me briefly as he stopped at a red light.

"What happened to your face?" he asked me, sounding calmer than he did earlier.

"Don't worry about it."

Josh scoffed and shook his head at me.

"Did you and Fox get in a fight or something?" he questioned as he continued driving toward school.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "No. Drop it, Josh."

I could tell I annoyed him by not telling him what happened, but he let it go anyway. I didn't want to have to tell him about it anyway.

When we got to school, I kept my head down and stared at the floor as I walked in hopes of keeping my face hidden from everyone in the hall. I focused on my feet shuffling on the floor and ended up bumping into someone when I reached my locker. I moved my eyes up while keeping my head down to see that Trevor was staring back at me.

"Elijah?" he said, trying to level his face with mine.

I sighed and looked up at him just in time to see his shocked expression as his eyes zeroed in on my face. His hand cupped over his mouth in a surprised gesture.

"Are you okay? What happened? Who did that to you?" Trevor asked in a quick succession.

I didn't want to deal with him or anyone else who was going to be asking me the same exact questions. All I wanted was to keep my head low and avoid contact with everyone.

"I'm fine, Trev," I replied with a sigh, opening my locker. "I really don't want to talk about it."

Trevor nodded. "As long as you're okay."

I sent him a small, grateful smile as I rifled through my locker for my things.

"Anyway, I just wanted to come over here and apologize for being so stand-offish with you," he said with a sheepish smile. "I guess I just got kinda awkward after what happened, but I feel bad about it."

"It's fine," I assured him. "Really."

"You should come back to sitting with us at lunch," he offered kindly. "Everyone was asking about you last week and I had no idea what to say to them."

"I'll sit with you guys today," I promised, shutting my locker once I had all that I needed.

"Perfect," he replied, his smile widening.

Trevor and I went our separate ways after the bell rang. The day went by without too many people asking me about my injuries until hockey practice after school ended.

When I entered the locker room, I received stares from everyone I passed. Some of the guys looked around at others in the room, probably thinking one of them was the person who had done it.

After getting onto the ice, Coach Silva's eyes widened when he caught sight of me. While everyone was warming up, he pulled me aside.

"Did someone on the team do that to you?" Coach Silva asked in a low tone.

I shook my head. "No, sir."

"Okay. Did someone at home do that to you?"

I shook my head again. "My dad knows about it and it's been taken care of."

Coach Silva nodded. "Good."

He looked over to where the others were warming up and then looked back to me, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"If anyone ever gives you a hard time, you can come to me," he offered, looking straight into my eyes with a serious expression. "I don't care who it is, I will straighten them out."

"Thanks, Coach," I gratefully replied.

After one last nod, he sent me back toward the team where I continued getting questioning glances. Ryan looked as if he was going to question me about it before Coach Silva blew his whistle and gave us commands for some drills.

As I paired up with Ian for some defensive drills, he stared at me with a hard expression.

"What?" I snapped when his eyes never left my face.

"Did you at least hit them back?" Ian asked, moving the puck on his stick.

I shook my head, my expression matching his. "No."

Ian scoffed, shooting the puck my way with a strong force. The puck almost bounced over my stick when it hit, but I was able to gain control.

"You should have hit them back," was all he said before his face went back to a stony expression, waiting for me to pass the puck back.

We continued our drill in silence.

I didn't know much about Ian, but I did know he confused the hell out of me.

***

While I was sitting at home on Wednesday afternoon, the day before Thanksgiving, my phone rang to interrupt my attention on the TV. I made sure to check the caller ID to make sure it wasn't my mother before answering it when I saw that it was Fox.

"Hello?"

"My mom's makin' me take Fawn to the mall," Fox said without a greeting. "Come with me."

I sighed, leaning my head back on the couch to stare up at he ceiling.

"I'm not in the mood for the mall," I told him.

"Tough shit," Fox retorted. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

I groaned when he hung up the phone and got up from the couch to get ready in my room. As I walked up the stairs, I passed by an angry looking Ava.

"Hey, you wanna go to the mall?" I asked her.

She stopped and looked at me with her scowl, silently staring at me for a few moments before nodding her head.

"Fine," she said, continuing her way down the stairs.

Ava was waiting for me downstairs by the time I finished getting ready. She sat on the couch, staring down at her phone.

"Are you ready?" she asked, looking up at me.

"Yeah, we're just waiting on Fox and Fawn to get here," I replied to which she stared at me with a blank look.

"Fawn Ridley?" she wondered with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"Yeah? What's wrong with her?"

Ava rolled her eyes, standing up from the couch. "She's one of the popular girls and she's kinda bitchy."

She sounded like someone I knew.

I sent her a stern look. "Don't say that word, you're twelve."

Her eyes narrowed as she put a scowl on her face. "I'm almost thirteen."

Before I could say anything, Fox blew on the horn outside the house. I motioned for Ava to follow me to the door and the two of us walked outside to the car. Fox and Fawn looked like they were in an argument and ultimately Fox won, Fawn getting out of the car and moving to the back seat.

I slid into the passenger's seat while Ava wordlessly made her way to the back seat.

"What's wrong with your face?" Fawn questioned, sticking her head between Fox and me.

Fox shoved her face back with his hand, causing her to let out a strangled sound of protest.

"Exactly what's going to be wrong with your face if you stick your nose up here again," Fox threatened, the two of them wearing matching irritated expressions.

Fawn sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. "You won't hit me."

"No, but I'll sick Ava on you," he told her with raised eyebrows. "She's scrappy."

I glanced back to see Ava's smug expression and chuckled at her. Fawn and Ava shared a look but didn't say anything before the both turned to face forward.

I looked to Fox. "Who pissed in your cereal this morning? You're moodier than usual," I pointed out with an accusatory expression.

"No, I'm not. I'm always like this," he said as he pulled away from the curb.

"He's just mad because Mom is making him take me to the mall," Fawn spoke up. "You're lucky I didn't convince her to make you take my friends too."

"I would never do that," Fox retorted. " *You're* lucky I'm taking you and not just dropping you off at an animal shelter."

Fawn scoffed and reached up to smack the back of his head.

Fox reached back while he was still driving, trying to reach her. Fawn just snickered as she sat out of his reach.

Eventually we made it to the mall in one piece. The four of us walked toward the entrance, Fawn ahead of the rest of us. We followed her to the escalator and she led us to *Pink* .

Fox stopped short, glaring at his little sister. "You can go in there alone."

"Mom told you not to leave me alone," Fawn pointed out with her hands on her hips.

"You're fourteen, I think you can handle going into a store alone," he retorted.

I looked over to Ava who looked as if she wanted to go in the store as well. Knowing her, she wouldn't want to be alone with Fawn.

"Fine, but have fun explaining yourself to Mom if I get stolen," Fawn sassed.

"They'd bring you back, trust me," Fox told her, crossing his arms over his chest.

I sighed and spoke up, "We should just go in with them. I don't want to leave Ava alone."

Ava scoffed but she didn't protest. Fox shot me a glare while Fawn looked at him with a triumphant smirk and then the four of us made our way into the store.

Fox looked around the store with a disgusted look on his face as we followed Fawn to where she wanted to go. He wasn't doing a very good job at acting like he wasn't gay.

I shook my head at him and looked down at my sister. "Did you bring money?"

Ava nodded. "I took some from my stash."

"Your stash?" I asked with a quizzical look. "You know what, I don't even want to know."

We followed Fawn over to the leggings and sports bras where she rifled through piles of the clothes to look for what she wanted. Fox crossed his arms over his chest as he watched her, jutting his knee out as he placed most of his weight on his right leg and tapped his foot.

"Do you need anything, Ava?" I asked her.

She just shrugged. "I don't know. I usually do this with Mom. She knows what to get."

Fawn looked over to us, seeming to have heard what Ava said, before holding up two pairs of leggings for all of us to see.

"Which ones do you like Ava?" she asked, looking toward my little sister.

Ava thought about it for a moment before pointing to the black and white pair with see through mesh on the sides that Fawn held in her right hand.

"I like those, and they have pockets," Ava answered.

Fawn smiled at her. "Good choice, I like these too."

Ava gave her a slight close lipped smile as Fawn put the other leggings back, keeping the ones Ava picked in her hand.

"Come on," Fawn said to Ava, motioning for her to follow. "Let's go pick something out for you."

With that, the two girls sauntered through the store together, leaving Fox and me alone.

"Great, Fawn's gonna corrupt Ava," Fox spoke up as we watched the two girls look through a rack of sweatshirts.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at him with a playful smile resting on my lips.

"I think they're both already pretty corrupt," I responded with a laugh.

"That's true," Fox agreed with a sigh.

The girls looked around the store for a little while longer and even ended up buying a few things. By the time they were done, the two of them were chatting together like they had been friends for years. Fawn led us to a sports store and immediately walked over to the Bruins shirts.

"Since when do you like hockey?" Fox asked her in a suspicious tone.

Fawn rolled her eyes as she looked through the rack of shirts.

"I've always liked hockey," she retorted.

"Yeah, but not enough to buy yourself a shirt," he pointed out with raised eyebrows.

I looked over to Ava for an explanation, but she just shrugged.

Fawn sighed and turned to her brother. "Eddie likes hockey."

"Who the hell is Eddie?"

Fawn just waved him off while Fox glanced at me with wide eyes. I couldn't help but laugh at him.

Fox put his hands on his hips and glared at his sister. "You're not buying clothes just to impress some guy."

Fawn sighed. "I don't like anything in here anyway."

With that, the four of us headed to the food court by Ava's request.

After we all got our food, we sat at a table near the window, Fox and I on one side while Fawn and Ava were across from us.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Fox started, his mouth full of food. "We're meeting up after Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow for Black Friday."

"I want to go!" Fawn exclaimed to which her brother just shot her a glare.

I didn't. She could take my spot.

"I think I'll pass," I told him.

Fox just shook his head. "You're not passing."

I sighed and nodded in agreement. It wasn't worth getting into an argument with Fox because I knew he would always find a way to force me.

And for some reason, I would always listen to him.

**

Thanks for reading!

Let me know what you think of the chapter! What do you think about everyone's reaction to Elijah's injury? What about the mall trip with Fawn and Ava?

21

My father was one of those unfortunate people whose birthday fell around a holiday. Unfortunately for him, Thanksgiving fell on his birthday this year, so we were going to have a double celebration to combine the two. He didn't seem to mind it all that much. He was never really a fan of his birthday anyway. I assumed it was something that happened the older you got.

Since we weren't due to start our festivities until three, I stayed up in my room to catch some extra hours of sleep. I was going to be out with the team tonight and I knew I would be tired.

"Elijah, come down soon sweetie," Mindy called, lightly tapping on my bedroom door. "Your grandparents are here."

I sighed and called out to let her know I heard her. Rolling out of bed, I threw on a dark brown sweater along with some dark jeans before heading to the bathroom to fix my hair and brush my teeth.

As soon as I made it downstairs, I was bombarded by my grandmother. She threw her arms around me in a hug and then placed her hands on my face as she pulled away.

"Elijah, darling, what is this bruise?" she questioned me in a concerned tone. My bruise was fading, but not enough for a caring grandmother to miss.

"Hockey," I lied with a light smile. "You know how it is."

Gram shook her head. "That sport is too rough. I could barely watch it when your father played."

"Leave him be. He's tough. He can handle it," my grandfather interjected as he made his way over to us. Gram stepped away from me and sent her husband an annoyed look but didn't argue with him.

Grandpa threw an arm around me briefly in a greeting.

"Oh! Elijah, I almost forgot," Gram suddenly said, digging through her purse and pulling out an envelope. "We will be in Florida for your birthday, so I wanted to give you your card now."

I took the envelope and sent her a playful smile. "You could just take me to Florida for my birthday.

Gram and Grandpa both chuckled.

"Some other time, darling. I promise," Gram assured me with a loving smile.

Josh's loud steps down the stairs caught the attention of my grandparents. He was dressed similarly to me, with a dark sweater and jeans.

"Joshua!" Gram greeted.

Instead of staying in on their greetings with Josh, I left the room to go find my father. I found him in the kitchen with Mindy and Ava, slaving over the stove for dinner.

"Shouldn't you *not* be doing any work on your birthday?" I asked, causing him to turn around with a bowl of squash in his hands.

A playful smile pulled on his lips. "Good morning— oh I mean afternoon. Glad you could join us, sleepy head."

"Figured I'd schedule you in on my busy day," I teased, leaning back against the counter.

Dad set the bowl down and nodded toward the card in my hand.

"You're getting gifts on *my* birthday?" he questioned me with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, sorry you're going to have to share your birthday with me," I jokingly told him.

"There isn't anyone I'd rather share it with," Dad replied in a loving tone, wrapping an arm around me and kissing my forehead.

I backed away from the sap that is my father and shook my head at him while he just let out a chuckle.

Soon after, dinner was ready and we all sat at the dining room table. When we were all finished, Mindy went to the kitchen and brought back the cake for Dad's birthday and after we sing to him, he began opening his presents.

I got him a gift card and a framed photo of Josh, Ava, and I. When he opened my gift, his face lit up and his smiled widened to his eyes when he looked over at me.

"I love it," he told me gratefully. "It's perfect. I know exactly where I'll hang it. Thank you so much, Elijah."

Finally, it was time for Josh's gift. I could tell Josh was a little nervous about how Dad would react to his gift. Josh shuffled his feet and avoided direct eye contact, but Dad didn't notice as he took the envelope from his hand.

I watched Josh as he intently stared at Dad opening the envelope. As soon as the papers were out, Dad furrowed his eyebrows and read the page. A few moments later, his eyes welled up in tears as he tightly clutched the paper in his hands and glanced over at Josh who gave him a tight lipped smile.

Without saying a word, Dad stood up and threw his arms around Josh, tightly holding onto him. Josh buried his face in his shoulder as the two of them embraced. Even I had to admit it was a heartwarming sight.

Mindy put her arm around me as she came to my side and wiped some tears from her eyes. Dad pulled away from Josh and smiled at each of us before looking back down at the papers.

"Where do I sign?" he asked in a raspy voice, chuckling slightly as he ran his hand down his face.

After Dad had calmed down and signed the papers, the family started on a casual discussion that I really had no interest in. I listened for a little while before deciding to get some sleep before I had to leave for Black Friday shopping with the team.

"I'm going to get some sleep before going out tonight," I let everyone know as I stood up from the table.

"Okay, darling," Gram said, motioning for me to go to her. I obliged and leaned down to hug her.

"Maybe we can arrange for you to visit us in Florida some time soon," Grandpa offered as I went to hug him.

I smiled. "That'd be cool."

"Goodnight, Elijah," Dad said. "Please be careful tonight."

I nodded. "I will."

I waved goodbye to everyone else before making the trek to my room. As soon as I reached it, I realized I had left my phone downstairs. Letting out an annoyed sigh, I trudged back down, but stopped when I heard my name among hushed voices in the kitchen.

"So, how's Elijah doing?" Gram asked. "Is he adjusting well?"

I heard Dad sigh. I bet he was rubbing his forehead like he always did when he was agitated or deep in thought.

"I don't know," he admitted. "He doesn't talk much about anything."

"He's friends with some of the other LGBT kids at school, but I don't think they're very close," Josh spoke up. "I don't think he's fully adjusted to the school yet."

"He's been there for months," Grandpa added, sounding slightly annoyed. "What if it's not a good fit for him? You can't keep him enrolled there if it's not good for him, Daniel."

Dad sighed again. "Like I said, he doesn't really talk about it."

"I think he's just more closed off now after being kicked out from his mothers," Mindy suggested. "I'm sure it didn't feel good to be cast out from his friends and his mother."

"I'm a little worried about him. He seems so fragile at times. I'm afraid to say the wrong thing to him," Dad confessed. "He doesn't seem very social, he sleeps a lot..."

"He didn't talk much tonight," Grandpa agreed.

"Maybe he should see a therapist," Gram suggested

"Yeah..." Dad trailed, "Yeah, maybe he should."

Deciding I was done listening to this, I briskly walked into the kitchen and snatched my phone off of the counter, careful to keep my eyes on the floor. I quickly started heading back to my room.

"Elijah," Dad called out, sounding sympathetic. I just ignored him and took the stairs two at a time all the way up to my room.

I plopped myself down on my bed face down after plugging my phone in to charge.

I wanted to cry at the thought of my family thinking I needed help. I already felt like a huge burden dropped onto Dad and Mindy, and this made me feel even more so.

My life was a mess. If I wasn't here, Dad could just have Josh as his son and not have to worry about him being fragile like me. Josh could be the son that every father wanted and Dad wouldn't have to be afraid to talk to him.

It was clear that I had interrupted a family dynamic between Dad, Mindy, Josh, and Ava when I arrived. That dynamic was never really repaired and I tried to convince myself I wasn't intruding in their home. Now it was clear I had burdened the family, not only my father.

I didn't realize I was crying until my pillow dampened with my tears. A sigh escaped my lips as I turned over on my side and a tear rolled from my eye then down the bridge of my nose.

My heart clenched at the thought of the conversation I heard earlier.

I felt pathetic.

***

"Dammit, Elijah. Why are you still asleep?" Fox's angry voice woke me up.

I rolled over on my side to see him standing before me with his arms crossed and his head tilted to the side in an impatient manner.

"I'm not going," I mumbled, shutting my eyes once again.

"You are, even if I have to drag you out of bed," Fox replied, tearing the blanket away from my body.

I shot him a scowl, my eyes narrowed.

"Be mad at me all you want," Fox said, "but you're getting up and we're leaving in ten minutes."

I let out a heavy sigh and sat up, stretching my arms above my head. Fox and I shared a look and I motioned toward the door.

"Aren't you going to leave so I can change?" I asked in an annoyed tone.

Fox gave me a deadpanned look. "We change in the locker room everyday together."

"Get out." I pointed toward the door.

Fox rolled his eyes and made his way to the doorway.

"Fine, but if you try to lock yourself in here, I *will* get this door open and get you out," he threatened before leaving and tightly shutting the door.

Since I was alone, thoughts of what my family had said came rushing back to my mind. I tried to push the thoughts out, but they had already soured my mood.

I quickly got ready and made my way down stairs so that Fox wouldn't come back up and break down my door. When I got down to the living room, I made sure to avoid eye contact with Josh.

"Are you finally ready?" Fox asked, causing me to pick my gaze up from the floor.

I just nodded and followed Josh and Fox out to the car. Luckily, we were taking Fox's car so I could sit in the back by myself and not have to suffer through sitting beside Josh. The two of them held conversation in the front while I drowned them out, looking out the window at the trees as we passed through town.

We arrived at the sports store in about ten minutes, where a line was already formed at the doors.

"Shit," Fox cursed. "It's already packed."

"There's some spots over there," Josh told him, pointing toward the back of the parking lot.

As soon as Fox parked the car, the three of us made our way outside into the harsh cold. I quickly stuffed my hands into my pockets as I shivered.

"The guys are here," Josh said, looking down at his phone. "We're going to meet at the line."

And with that, the three of us walked through the parking lot toward the enormous line in front of the store. As another shiver ran through my body, I found myself wishing I had brought a warmer jacket.

"You cold?" Fox asked, stepping closer to me.

"It's fuckin' freezing," I retorted, my teeth chattering.

"You want my jacket while we wait?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "No."

Josh watched our exchange with a look of suspicion and skepticism.

"Okay, but don't complain if you get frostbite," Fox warned, looking away from me to glance over at the line where the rest of the guys had just appeared.

"We should have gotten here earlier," Ian said in an annoyed tone as we approached them.

Ryan shook his head. "It's fine."

"For you maybe. I'm freezing my balls off and we're going to be the last ones in there," Ian complained with a scoff, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Quit being moody," Alex said, punching Ian's shoulder.

I ignored the conversation between the guys, too focused on how cold I was. I curled my toes in my shoes, trying to warm them up. Fox's stare was the only thing giving me warmth at that moment. Without saying anything, Fox slipped his jacket off and put it over my shoulders. None of the guys said anything about the exchange, but they all had looks of confusion on their faces.

After a while, the line finally moved up and we were able to get into the warmth of the store. I took Fox's jacket off and wordlessly handed it back to him.

"Hey, what's your problem tonight?" Fox asked me quietly as I tried to walk away.

"I told you I didn't want to come," I shot back with a scowl. "But you forced me. Like you always do."

Fox stared at me with his eyes narrowed in confusion.

"I just wanted to include you," he said.

"Well, maybe I didn't want to be included in this," I told him, my tone sounding more irritated.

I had never seen Fox look hurt, but that was the only word I could come up with to describe his expression. His hurt expression quickly turned to an annoyed one as he said his next words.

"Fine, go walk around by yourself then," Fox spat before stomping away from me to go find his friends.

My anger was misdirected at Fox, but I couldn't help but be annoyed at him. I wasn't having a good night and he just had to force me out of the house and do something I didn't want to do. I wasn't in the mood for this and I wasn't going to act like I was.

The store was too crowded for me. Everywhere I went I was getting bumped into by middle aged women with their hands filled with things they were buying for their children. Some people were even pushing strollers with their poor young kids in them this late at night. Black Friday was definitely overrated and I wasn't enjoying myself one bit.

I sighed and briskly walked over to a section of the store that seemed less crowded than the rest. I ended up in the women's section in the far corner of the store. It was still quite crowded, but at least there was room for me to breathe. I backed myself into a clear area of the wall and leaned my head back, closing my eyes.

"Elijah?" a familiar voice called out.

My eyes shot open and widened and shocked when I saw who was standing in front of me. Micah, my old best friend, stared at me with a look of confusion and apprehension. My voice was caught in my throat, but I managed to let out a reply.

"Micah," I said in a raspy voice.

The level of discomfort was high and I didn't know what to expect from this interaction. If he was here, then that meant some of my old teammates were here as well, and I didn't want to end up seeing any of them.

Micah stared at me, clearing his throat before speaking again. "My uh... my dad told me he saw you not that long ago."

I just nodded.

I noticed him staring at the bruise that still marked my face, but he didn't ask about it. Nothing about me concerned him anymore.

"What are you doing over here?" Micah asked me with an awkward expression, looking around at the women's clothes near us.

"Getting away from the crowd," I answered, looking down at my feet.

"I'm getting some stuff for Sadie," Micah told me, causing me to look up at him. "I finally asked her out."

He had been crushing on this girl since Freshman year and never once had the courage to ask her out.

"Are you... uh... are you doing good?" Micah stuttered and something in me snapped.

"What are you doing talking to me?" I angrily asked him.

His eyes widened at my harsh tone, but I couldn't find it in me to feel any remorse. I wasn't in the mood to deal with him, especially not tonight.

"Elijah, I'm sorr—"

"You're what?" I interjected, stepping closer to him. "You're sorry? Which part are you sorry about? Telling the entire team after I came out to you? Or letting them bully me and doing nothing about it?" I spat.

Micah's jaw tensed and his eyes sunk in sadness. He had no right to be *sad* about what happened.

Micah was the first person I came out to. He wasn't overly supportive, but he didn't hate me for it either. His reaction gave me the rest of the courage I needed to come out to my mom, but before I did, I had found out Micah had spilled my secret to the rest of the team. I would never forget the feeling of betrayal when I learned that the team had found out. They ganged up on me, spat insults at me, and hit me. Then I got kicked out by my mother and I truly hit rock bottom.

So, Micah's apologies meant shit to me.

"Elijah, hey I'm—" Fox surprised me when he made his way over to us. "Who's this?"

Fox looked Micah up and down, seeming as if he was trying to intimidate him.

"No one," I mumbled, walking over to where Fox stood. "Let's just go."

"Wait," Micah tried to stop me, but I ignored him.

Fox stayed in place, still glaring at Micah. I had to tug on Fox's arm to finally get him to follow me.

"What was that about?" Fox asked, glancing back at where Micah stood.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," I muttered.

Fox scoffed, but didn't say anything, as the two of us continued our trek through the store.

Tonight was just one big shit show and I was more than ready for it to be over.

**

Did I totally forget to update because I forgot yesterday was Friday? Yes, yes I did. During winter break I never know what day of the week it is. So sorry!

What did you think about the chapter? About Elijah's grandparents? And Elijah's Dad's reaction to Josh's gift? What about what happened after dinner and Elijah's reaction? AND Black Friday shopping with Fox and Micah?

Thanks for reading!

22

After having a whole weekend off from hockey, practice was especially rough on Monday afternoon as we prepared for our two games this week. Although I loved hockey, I was glad when practice wrapped up for the night so I could get some rest.

"Guys," Fox shouted, grabbing the attention of the team. "Don't forget you have to get your permission slips signed so you can leave during last period on Friday for the game. If it's not signed, you're not coming."

Everyone let out assurances that they heard Fox and would have their slips signed by Friday. Since the game was quite far, we needed to leave during last period to get there on time to have a practice before the start of the game.

"Bruins game at my house tonight, you in?" Fox asked me, clapping a hand down on my shoulder.

I sighed, grabbing my hockey bag. "I guess."

Fox smirked. "Don't sound too excited."

I playfully rolled my eyes at him and he followed me out of the locker room.

"Can I just head there with you now?" I asked, realizing I didn't want to get caught up in a talk with my father.

Dad made it clear he wanted to talk to me about what happened on Thanksgiving and I just wanted to avoid the topic all together.

"Sure," Fox replied with a shrug.

"Going to Fox's!" I shouted over at Josh who was getting into the driver's seat of his car.

Josh gave me a strange look but ultimately nodded before shutting the car door.

"Any reason you're dying to come home with me?" Fox teased as the two of us got into his car.

I rested my arm on the center console and tapped my fingers against it, effectively ignoring Fox's question. He placed his hand over mine to stop my tapping, sending a shock directly to my chest. I suddenly pulled my hand away and looked toward him with a frightened expression. His teasing grin sent shivers through my spine. I couldn't help but think Fox's smile was something out of a dream.

The way he looked at me when he smiled paralyzed me, so I wasn't able to look away from him. Flutters crept through my stomach like a herd of monarch butterflies were in there flying south for their migration. All he had to do was smile and I was putty in his hands.

I had no idea what had gotten into me. I shook my head to clear my mind and finally looked away.

Fox laughed. "What's the matter? You're acting like I just stabbed you."

"I'm not," I grumbled, looking out the window.

Fox scoffed, sounding as if he didn't believe me, but didn't say anything else.

Eventually, we made it to his house where it appeared that no one else was home.

"Your parents aren't here?" I asked him as we stepped into the house.

"Mom works late and Dad travels," he replied, stopping to place his hockey bag in the hall closet.

"Please don't tell me the goons are coming over," an unfamiliar voice spoke out from behind us. Fox and I turned to see the girl standing with her hands on her hips. I recognized her from the family portrait.

"Okay, I won't tell you," Fox retorted, causing the girl to roll her eyes. She looked me up and down in confusion.

"You're new," she said.

"Kinda," I replied.

"Raven, Elijah. Elijah, Raven," Fox introduced us. We greeted each other briefly before Raven turned back to her brother.

"Just don't be too loud down here, I'm doing homework and Fawn has a friend over," Raven warned, causing Fox's eyes to darken.

"What friend?" he questioned with aggression in his voice.

Raven shrugged. "Some kid. Teddy maybe? I don't know."

"Eddie," Fox said in a hard tone, moving toward the stairs. Raven and I shared confused looks before I finally realized who Eddie was.

"Fox, wait," I tried to stop him, catching his arm in my hand as I sprinted toward the stairs. He didn't even turn to look at me.

"I'm not waiting. That kid probably has his grimy hands all over my sister," Fox spat, ripping his arm out of my grasp.

"She's going to be mad at you if you go up there," I warned him, but he didn't listen as he continued up the stairs.

I sighed from the bottom of the stairs as I finally lost sight of Fox.

"She's going to kill him," Raven said from behind me.

I turned to look at her and nodded in agreement. "He deserves it."

Raven snorted out a laugh. "He does. Robin used to be the same way when I had boys over."

"I'm not like that with my sister," I chuckled. "She's tougher than me."

"Most girls are tough," Raven said with a grin. "It's just our meat-head fathers and brothers that think they need to protect us for some reason."

I laughed and nodded along. I could relate to having a protective father.

A few moments later there was high-pitched screaming and then Fox came running down the stairs.

"She hit me!" he exclaimed, looking to me for sympathy.

Raven rolled her eyes. "You deserved it. Anyway, if your friends are coming over then I'm hiding up in my room."

"You don't want to watch the game with us?" he asked.

"Not with your friends," she replied with a raised eyebrow. "They all check me out."

Fox rolled his eyes. "They do not."

"Yes, they do. Except him," Raven retorted, pointing toward me.

"He's gay," Fox told her and I gave him an annoyed look.

"Good," was the last thing Raven said before she turned on her heel to storm up the stairs.

Fox sighed and led me over to the couch where we sat down beside each other. He shook his head and let out another frustrated sigh, causing me to look at him expectantly.

"I'm not going to be able to think straight with Fawn having that boy in her room," Fox complained, resting his elbow on the arm of the couch and placing his head in his hand.

A smile crept on my face as I watched his worrisome expression. It was cute seeing him all concerned about his sister.

"She'll be fine," I assured him. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes with a look of disbelief.

"You'll be like this when Ava starts bringing boys over," Fox grumbled, turning his attention back to the TV.

I chuckled. "No, I won't. And she might not even be interested in boys."

"Let's hope," Fox muttered.

I shook my head at him and pulled out my phone to see that I had a text message from Trevor. He and I were pretty much back to normal after the whole kissing incident, though I could tell he still had a crush on me.

Are you doing anything special for your birthday next week?

"Who are you texting?" Fox asked, suddenly interested and leaning over to check out my phone.

"Just Trevor," I replied. Fox's expression darkened.

"What does he want?" he mumbled.

"He's just asking if I'm doing anything for my birthday next week. He likes to plan ahead," I told him with a confused look.

"Your birthday is next week? Why is he trying to plan something for you? Did you hookup with him?"

My eyes widened at Fox's sudden questions.

"Woah," I said to stop him. "Where the hell did all that come from? No, I didn't hookup with him."

"Good, don't," Fox quickly responded.

I quirked my head in confusion. "You were the one that told me I should."

"I changed my mind," he told me. "I don't think it's a good idea anymore."

"Okay..."

Fox's jaw clenched as he stared forward at the television. He bit down on the inside of his cheek before allowing his eyes to travel toward me.

"What are you staring at me for?" he snapped, giving me a hard glare.

I just shrugged and turned away from him. I couldn't help but think that he was acting strange and I couldn't shake an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach as I sat close to him. Maybe I was the one acting strange.

The two of us sat in silence before the rest of the group came barging into Fox's house. Alex and Ian squeezed onto the couch with us, causing me to have to move even closer to Fox, out legs touching. The same shock from when Fox touched my hand in the car traveled through me at the feeling of our legs being pressed together.

"They're actually playing good!" Alex happily exclaimed, backhanding my shoulder and dragging my attention to the hockey game that had already started.

"We'll see how long they can keep this up," Ian grumbled, leaning his elbow on the arm of the couch and putting his chin in his hand.

The first period was uneventful and the only noises coming from the guys were sounds of disappointment at mistakes by the players and a few cheers at near-goals.

"So, I finally got with Beth over the weekend," Alex boastfully announced. I just rolled my eyes at him.

"About time!" Ryan cheered.

Instead of listening to Alex rehash his weekend spent with Beth, I turned to focus on Fox who looked like he wasn't paying much attention either. When he noticed me looking at him, he turned to look back, a small smile taking over his face.

That was enough to set my insides on fire. I mentally punched myself for feeling this type of way about Fox, but still I couldn't stop the fluttering feeling of when he had his eyes on me.

A warm smile spread on my own face at the sight of his, causing Josh to loudly clear his throat. Both of our gazes shot over to Josh in confusion, but he just looked away.

"Josh come with me to the kitchen for a sec," Fox instructed, pushing his hand down on my leg to heave himself off of the couch.

Josh sighed in annoyance, but followed him anyway.

I was left with a quizzical expression in the heat of my own confusion.

***

I rushed to the locker room on Friday afternoon to hand in my permission slip and board the bus for the away game.

"I'm sorry Ian, but I can't let you come," I heard Coach Silva say as I rounded the corner toward his office.

My eyebrows furrowed and my steps slowed as I listened in on the conversation.

"Coach," Ian complained, "my parents would let me skip last period, I just wasn't able to get them to sign the slip."

"I understand that, but I can't take you out of class for the game without their permission. You need to go back to class."

Ian let out a loud sigh and nearly bumped into me when he exited Coach's office, sending a scowl my way.

"Looks like you're on your own tonight," Ian muttered, pushing past me to leave the locker room.

Coach came out of his office a moment later.

"Have your slip?" he asked me.

I wordlessly nodded and handed it to him. He checked that I had it signed before motioning his head toward the door.

"You can go out to the bus."

I wasted no time grabbing my hockey bag and rushing out to the bus where the rest of the team, except for Ian, was already waiting. Fox was leaning back against the bus with his arms crossed over his chest with an impatient look on his face as if he was waiting for me.

"Ian's not coming," I said, stopping in front of him.

"I know. I told him Coach wouldn't let him leave last period without the slip," Fox replied with a sigh.

"What are we going to do?"

Fox let out another exaggerated sigh, leaning his head back. "We'll probably have to double shift you."

"So you're going to break up another pairing?"

Fox sent me an irritated look. "Well I can't double shift anyone else. You and Ian are the best defensemen we have, so we need to make up for that loss."

"Okay," I agreed, hoping his gaze would soften. "You're right."

"On the bus, boys," Coach Silva instructed as he came out of the school.

I followed Fox onto the bus and tossed my bag down in the first few seats with the others before sitting down beside Fox, who looked annoyed that I'd decided to accompany him.

"You're really going to sit with me when there's an empty seat right over there?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in question.

I nodded. "I want to sit with you."

Fox slowly but surely wiped the annoyed look off his face and morphed it into a more content one.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I asked him as he leaned back in the seat, propping his knees up on the seat in front of us.

"Hm?"

"What did you talk to Josh about during the game the other night?"

Fox scoffed. "A little thing called none of your business."

I had a strong feeling whatever they spoke about was concerning me and I hated being talked about behind my back. Especially when it was Josh doing it.

I banged my shoulder into Fox's, shoving him against the window. He let out a groan of annoyance and sent me a scowl.

"Tell me," I urged him.

He reached toward me and used his hand to push my chest back. I hated the way my skin burned whenever we had contact. Or, I loved it. I couldn't tell.

"I'm going to knock you into the aisle if you come at me again," Fox warned.

"Just tell me!"

"No."

I groaned aloud and crossed my arms over my chest, staring down at my lap with a scowl. My scowl only deepened when I heard a chuckle come from Fox.

When I glanced up at him to shoot him a glare, I was met with a glowing expression. Fox's smile was wide as he looked down at me and the scowl

was knocked off of my face and replaced with an impassive look as my breath hitched in my throat.

The way Fox had been affecting me lately was messing with my head. All he did was smile at me, actually he *laughed at me* , and all I wanted to do was throw my arms around him and kiss him.

Maybe I did need therapy.

"Fine... uh... be that way," I stuttered.

All he did was wink at me.

He winked at me.

I swallowed a lump in my throat as I quickly averted my gaze elsewhere. Fox chuckled from beside me before glancing out the window.

By the time we got to the rink, I couldn't get away from Fox fast enough. I didn't like the things he was doing to my head, even if he didn't realize he was doing them.

As the bus came to a stop, Fox and I stood up at the same time. The aisle filled up quick with all the other players, causing me to stand in front of Fox in a rigid stance. He stood so close to me I could feel the heat from his body on my skin. When the aisle cleared enough for us to get out of the seat, Fox lightly placed his hand on my lower back to guide me forward. I jumped at his touch as goosebumps covered me all over.

"Every time I touch you, you act like I stabbed you," Fox pointed out as we made our way off the bus. "What's your deal?"

"Nothing," I muttered, grabbing my back out of one of the front seats and stepping off the bus.

Fox just scoffed as he copied my actions.

I did my best to avoid Fox as we practiced on the ice prior to the game, but he made it difficult. Every chance he got, he skated by me and nonchalantly

brushed up against my body. It was like he was purposely trying to rattle me.

Eventually the game started and I was able to keep my mind off of Fox. Or so I thought.

My mind was playing tricks on me and I couldn't stop thinking about the way I felt when he touched me or how good he looked when he was so focused on the game.

I was so distracted that I wasn't paying attention during a play and ended up getting launched into the boards head first by the opposing team. The referee's whistle blew for a penalty as I sat on the ice with my head in my hands.

"Ellis, you alright?" Fox asked, quickly skating over to me.

I dragged my stare up to him to see a concerned expression on his face and quickly averted my gaze. Every time I looked at him, I couldn't think straight, and it was affecting how I was playing. Not to mention, I didn't have Ian here to pick up my slack.

I nodded. "I'm fine."

I kept my eyes away from him as I got up from the ice on my own.

"You need any help to the bench?" he asked, coming toward me with his arm stretched out.

I flinched away from him. "I'm good. Don't touch me."

I couldn't have him touching me anymore. It did things to my head.

Fox's eyes narrowed into slits before he shook his head and skated to where the face-off would be. I took my position off to the side and tried to clear my head. Fox easily won the face-off and batted the puck over to Josh who brought it to the offensive zone. I took my place on the point as Josh went straight for the net. He passed it off to Alex, who was coming up fast behind him.

The other team blocked Alex and kept him from getting a shot on. He looked around for a moment before slapping the puck back toward me just as Fox came into my line of view. Fox's stupid, handsome face distracted me, causing the puck to slide right by my stick and out of the zone.

"Ellis!" Fox exclaimed as he skated out of our zone.

I quickly followed behind him. The other team got a shot on goal, our goalie covering the puck to stop the play and allow us to have a line change.

"What the hell was that, Ellis?" Fox asked in an annoyed tone as we got back to the bench, smacking me in the back of the head. "Is your head okay?"

I glared at him. "It was fine until you just hit me."

Fox just rolled his eyes and sat down beside me on the bench. "Get your head out of the clouds and make the play next time."

I didn't even grant him a response, not being able to think straight with him being so close. I needed to get him out of my head. It was obviously doing me no good to have him consuming my thoughts.

And I guess that was why I played like shit the rest of the night.

**

Hello everyone. As some of you already know, I'm a college student. I just started my spring semester so from now until the beginning of May I'll be in school and that could mean some delays on updates. I try to plan out a schedule for everything I need to get done in the week so hopefully it won't really be an issue but I just want to give a warning that I have more going on now that school has started up again.

Anyway, please let me know what you think of the chapter. What do you think Fox and Josh talked about? What about the situation with Ian? And Elijah's feelings about Fox?

23

"Are you sure your head's okay?" Josh asked me as we got into his car after the bus dropped us off at school.

"Yeah, it's fine," I assured him with a sigh.

Losing was never fun and I really didn't want to talk to Josh since I was in a mood after how badly I played tonight. Not to mention, I was frustrated by the fact that I couldn't stop thinking about Fox Ridley.

Fox was consuming my every thought. I was practically drowning in handsome images of him in my head. My own brain hated me and wanted me to suffer.

"By the way don't make any plans next Friday and Saturday," Josh told me as he drove out of the school parking lot and toward our home.

"You mean don't make plans on my birthday?" I asked in an annoyed tone.

"Right," Josh confirmed.

"Not like I have anyone to make plans with," I muttered, resting my head against the window.

"You have plans with me, I just told you that," Josh responded in a light tone.

I didn't reply as Josh continued driving us home. By the time we got there, I saw that the lights were still on, meaning Dad had waited for us to get home like he always did. I sighed as I grabbed my stuff out of the car and made my way toward the house.

"How was the game?" Dad asked as soon as I stepped foot in the house, Josh right behind me. Dad sat in the living room on the couch with his glasses perched on his nose and a book in his hands.

"We lost," Josh told him with a shrug.

I waited for Josh to rat me out about hitting my head, but he never did. Usually Josh couldn't wait for the chance to tell Dad something about me, but surprisingly, he kept his mouth shut.

"You can't win them all," Dad reassured us with a smile.

After nodding in agreement, tried making my way to the stairs before my father called out my name. I sighed and shut my eyes for a moment in frustration before turning around to face him.

"Can I talk to you for a minute alone?" Dad asked with a hopeful look, motioning for me to sit beside him on the couch. Josh took that as his cue to leave and quickly jogged up the stairs.

"Yeah?" I muttered as I took a seat beside my father on the couch.

"I wanted to talk to you about what happened on Thanksgiving," he told me. I had already figured that was where this conversation was going.

"Dad, it's fine," I sighed, running a frustrated hand through my hair. "I'm over it."

Dad shook his head and gave me a serious look. "It's not fine. I'm sorry we talked about you behind your back. We shouldn't have done that."

I hummed in agreement, hoping to be done with this conversation.

"But I am concerned about you," Dad continued, eliciting a groan from me.

This was what I didn't want to talk about. His concern only made me feel fragile, like I was nothing but an emotional wreck and it was obvious to everyone who knew me.

"I promise you, I'm fine," I urged him, leaning back on the couch.

"You don't seem happy," he pointed out, his voice wavering a bit.

An uncomfortable feeling crept up in my stomach and I averted my gaze from my father, keeping my eyes situated on my hands that were in my lap.

"I think you could benefit from talking to somebody," Dad continued when I didn't say anything.

"I really don't want to," I mumbled, keeping my eyes down.

Dad placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "And I don't want to force you into anything that you don't want to do, but I'm worried about you."

I swallowed a lump in my throat and tilted my head back to look up at the ceiling.

"How about we make a deal?" Dad suggested, causing me to look toward him. "You talk to me about what's bothering you and we can make a decision together about what your best option is."

"Okay," I quietly uttered, knowing he wouldn't budge on this.

"Great," Dad replied with a smile, clapping his hand down on my shoulder. "Go get some rest."

As soon as he dismissed me, I scurried up the stairs and into my room and fell asleep that night wishing I could go back to a time when I didn't feel like such a burden.

***

The week went by and soon enough it was Friday night, the day before my birthday, and Josh insisted on the two of us going out after hockey practice, just the two of us. I spent the whole day dreading it, but didn't have the heart to decline his offer since he was making an effort to be closer to me.

I nearly groaned aloud when Josh pulled into the movie theater parking lot. The last thing I wanted to do was sit in the theater for two hours to watch a movie I didn't even want to see. At least I wouldn't have to speak to Josh much.

The two of us walked into the theater and up to the ticket booth.

"I got it, it's your birthday," Josh said when I started to take my wallet out. I wasn't about to argue with him about it, so I left my wallet in my pocket and allowed him to buy the tickets.

We ended up seeing some movie that I had never even heard of and it wasn't a complete snooze fest, so I wasn't too annoyed by my outing with Josh. He kept checking his phone during the entire thing, seemingly uninterested, but I didn't care.

"So, uh, how did you like the movie?" Josh awkwardly asked once we were in the car.

"It was alright," I replied.

"Yeah..." he trailed, pausing for a moment before he started the car. "So I've been meaning to talk to you about something."

I tried not to groan at his words. It seemed like all I ever did with him or my Dad was talk about serious things that I didn't care to speak about.

"Yeah?"

"Don't take this the wrong way," he quickly let out, looking at me briefly before looking back at the road. That probably meant I was going to take it the wrong way.

"What is it?" I asked in an irritated tone after he took a long pause.

"Okay, I'm just going to ask," he let out a deep breath, "do you have a thing for Fox?"

My eyes widened and I smacked my hand down on that center console as I whipped my head to face him.

" *What?* " I nearly screeched. "Why the hell would you ask me that?"

Was the way I was affected by Fox really *that* noticeable that I had Josh asking me about it?

Josh tightly pressed his lips together, looking uncomfortable.

He let out another breath before continuing, "Look, it's totally fine if you have a thing for him, but—"

"I do *not* ," I assured him, even though I wasn't too sure myself.

" *But* , Fox isn't— he's not—" Josh let out an exaggerated sigh after stammering his words.

"Spit it out, Josh," I snapped, heat rising on my cheeks.

"Um... he's not... he's not into dudes," Josh stuttered. "I just don't want you to get hurt or upset."

I almost laughed out loud at Josh's concerns. If only he knew just how 'not into dudes' Fox actually was.

I kept my laughs to myself and stared straight ahead at the road, my lips in a thin line.

"Okay," I finally said, not able to think of anything else to say.

"So you like him?" Josh asked lightly.

I sighed. "I guess."

I knew I felt something for him. I just didn't know exactly what it was.

Josh just nodded and the two of us didn't say much to each other for the rest of the ride home. When we got back to the house, I noticed there were more cars than usual parked on the road.

I raised my eyebrows in confusion and followed Josh out of the car and up toward the house.

"Who's here?" I asked him as we walked up the porch steps.

Josh just shrugged as he opened the door. He motioned for me to follow him toward the kitchen to which I reluctantly obliged.

The kitchen was dark when we walked in, but suddenly the lights flicked on and a chorus of people shouted "Surprise!" which caused me to jump back a bit.

After my eyes adjusted to the light, I looked around the room, my eyes immediately finding Fox who had a wide smile on his face. My breath hitched as I took in the way he looked. Josh nudged me with his elbow as if he caught me staring. I looked around the room again to see who else was here.

Along with Fox, our group from the team and the GSA kids, including Claudia, stood around the kitchen table where there was a birthday cake in the center.

"What's this?" I asked after the initial shock wore off.

Fox's smile fell into a sneer. "What the hell's it look like? It's a birthday cake."

I rolled my eyes, walking over to him. "I meant *this.* " I motioned to everyone in the kitchen.

"I may or may not have planned a gathering to celebrate your birthday," Fox replied with a smirk.

My smile broadened so wide I felt as though my cheek bones would be sore later. This was probably the first *real* smile on my face since I had come out. It was the first time I had felt genuinely happy. I felt like I could cry at my happiness.

"You didn't have to do this," I told him, looking around at the group in the kitchen, sharing a smile with Trevor.

"What? Did you think we weren't going to celebrate your birthday?"

Fox was looking at me like I was crazy, his lips pursed and his eyebrows raised in confusion. I wanted to kiss the look right off his face.

Instead, I took a step forward and hugged him, causing him to stumble back a bit. Fox looped his arm around my waist and patted my back with a chuckle.

"Thank you," I said, nearly breathlessly, in his ear.

We pulled apart and stared at each other with matching smiles. Josh cleared his throat and walked in between us.

"Let's do the cake," Josh suggested, glancing at me with a look of urgency.

I took my eyes off of Fox long enough to greet everyone and Josh started lighting the candles.

"You guys don't have to sing to me," I told them, looking around the room at everyone.

"It's your birthday, of course we do!" Trevor exclaimed, eliciting sounds of agreement from the rest of the crowd.

"I–"

"We're singing to you. Get over it," Nadia interrupted me.

I sent a pleading look over to Fox who just ended up snickering at my expense.

"Get ready, Ellis, because we're singing to you," Alex spoke up, Ryan and Jude nodding in agreement as they chuckled.

I groaned as the group started singing and kept my eyes trained down on the cake. Fox came over and hooked his arm around my shoulders, causing me to look up. He gave me a boastful look as they all finished singing and then he released me.

"Make a wish," he said. "And make it a good one."

I smiled lightly at him before turning to the cake. I thought for a few moments and then blew out the candles which was quickly followed by cheers from the group. All cheered except for Ian who just stood there with his arms crossed. For once, I was slightly grateful for his hostility.

"Now let's eat this thing, I'm starving," Ryan joked, approaching the table.

"You can cut it," I told him, gesturing toward the cake.

"That's supposed to be the job for the birthday boy," he told me pointedly.

I gave him and unimpressed look to which he just chuckled and picked up the knife to start cutting the cake.

Trevor came over to me as Ryan started handing out pieces of cake.

"Did you wish for anything good?" Trevor asked me with a friendly smile, almost bumping his hip into mine.

I nodded. "I think so."

My wish was vague, but I truly hoped that it would be granted to me. All I wanted was happiness, the same happiness I felt at this moment, and that was my birthday wish.

"It was really nice of Fox to plan this for you," Trevor commented. "I didn't know you two were so close."

Before I could reply to his statement, Fox leaned over to be part of our conversation.

"Oh yeah, Elijah and I are best buds," Fox interjected, looking Trevor up and down.

Trevor just smiled kindly at him, seeming as if he didn't notice that Fox appeared to be sizing him up or asserting his dominance in some way. I smacked Fox's shoulder with the back of my hand and gave him a pointed look as if telling him to back off.

"Here," Ryan said as he shoved a plate with cake on it in my hands. "The best piece for you."

"What makes it the best piece?" I asked with a strange look on my face.

Ryan shrugged with a goofy smile. "Because I cut it just for you?"

I chuckled and playfully shook my head. "Thanks."

We all stood around and chatted while we ate our cake. Fox took the opportunity to leave me with Trevor and walk over to Claudia, causing my mind to turn green in jealousy. I hated watching the two of them interact. The way they laughed together and how he stood so close made them appear to be the perfect couple. I couldn't keep my jaw from clenching as I watched Fox smile down at her. The sound of my teeth grinding got the attention of Trevor.

"You alright?" he asked me, a concerned look on his face.

I cleared my throat, tearing my gaze away from the subject of my torment.

"Fine," I assured him as I mustered up a fake smile.

Trevor looked around the room, as if making sure no one was watching, before leaning closer to me and bringing his mouth to my ear.

"Do you mind if I give you your present in private?" he whispered.

My mind immediately filled with dread at the thought of what Trevor had planned for me, but it wasn't like I could tell him no.

"Sure," I whispered back with that same fake smile.

The two of us were able to quickly slip out of the room and into the hallway without being noticed by anyone. Trevor grabbed his gift for me before we left the room and stood in front of me with it in his hands.

"I just wanted to be able to explain why I got this for you without everyone around," Trevor told me and then chuckled when he saw the look on my

face, "Don't worry, it's nothing bad."

"Okay..." I trailed, holding out my hand for the rectangular gift.

Trevor handed it over to me and urged me to open it. When I pulled the paper off, I was met with a painting that held every color of the rainbow. It was strange, yet beautiful and intriguing.

"What's this?" I asked as I smiled down at the painting.

"Well, when I was in your room, I noticed you didn't really have anything in there," Trevor started, "So I decided to get you something to decorate with."

"I love it," I truthfully told him. I never would have thought to hang art in my room, but the painting was too amazing to keep hidden.

Trevor smiled widely. "It's by one of my favorite contemporary painters. It reminded me of you as soon as I saw it. That's why I wanted to get it for you."

I quirked my head to the side. "Reminded you of me?"

"It's beautiful, yet kind of chaotic and complex," Trevor explained in an even tone, a calm look on his face.

I stared blankly at him for a few moments, unsure of how to respond.

"Thank you, Trev," I finally let out.

I leaned forward to place a chaste kiss on his cheek, despite my better judgement. And just as I did, Fox came sauntering into the hallway and cleared his throat. I pulled away from Trevor to face Fox and was met with his not too happy, disapproving stare.

"We wanted to do your presents, unless you're too busy out here," Fox said in an almost accusing tone, crossing his arms over his chest.

I sent Fox an annoyed glare. Even though he probably didn't intend to, he made me jealous with his interactions with Claudia tonight. And I wasn't

about to let him shame me for my own with Trevor. Just a few weeks ago he was encouraging me to hook up with him, and now it seemed as if he wanted me to have nothing to do with him.

"No, we're all done," Trevor kindly told him as I kept my scowl on Fox.

Trevor walked back into the kitchen, leaving Fox and I standing alone in the hallway. Fox didn't say anything which only caused me to get more annoyed.

"What?" I snapped.

"I thought you weren't into Trevor," Fox said, his eyes narrowed in accusation.

I scoffed. "I'm not. I don't know why you care anyway."

"I don't," he obviously lied, trying to act nonchalant.

He smiled at me, wiping the accusatory look off of his face.

"Let's go do your presents," Fox suggested, turning around to head back to the kitchen.

I couldn't hold back my irritated groan as I followed him. All he seemed to do was confuse me. Even when he was being aggravating, I couldn't atop myself from being attracted to him.

As soon as I got back into the kitchen, Ryan motioned me over to him and handed me a card.

"Here you go, birthday boy," he said.

I thanked him as I opened the card to reveal a gift card. Most of the gifts from the group were either money or gift cards. Ian didn't even get me anything, but I wasn't bothered by it. I didn't really expect him to.

The last gift I opened was Fox's. Fox handed me the card with an excited, expectant look.

When I opened the card, a ticket fell out. Fox was quick to bend down and pick it up before handing it to me. Once I realized what it was, feelings of excitement and shock consumed me.

"Surprise?" Fox said, sounding slightly unsure.

All of my annoyance at him earlier washed away as I smiled widely at him, wanting to just throw my arms around him in a hug. I looked from him, to the Bruins ticket in my hand, and back up to him.

"You didn't have to do this," I told him.

Fox rolled his eyes. "It's not a big deal. Hope you're not busy tomorrow because we're going."

I chuckled and looked around at the rest of the group, most of which were smiling warmly.

"Thank you, Fox," I quietly said.

Fox smiled and tossed his arm around my shoulder. I couldn't help but notice the state we were getting from Josh.

I didn't care what Josh had to say about it. He didn't know Fox like I did, and I wasn't going to let him make me feel bad about the way I felt.

**

So as I was working on today's chapter I realized Elijah's birthday is in this chapter and today is my birthday so I felt like I should post it today. Here's my birthday present to you!

What did you think about Elijah's talk with his dad? And what he admitted to Josh? What about the surprise party Fox and Josh planned? And Fox's reaction to seeing Elijah with Trevor? Also, Elijah's gifts!

Let me know!

24

I hadn't felt this much excitement in a long time. The last time I felt this way was last year when my team won the state championship. Since then, nothing had been worthy of this feeling until now.

I stood in front of my mirror, pulling my Bruins jersey down. This would be my first Bruins game. My mother had never let me go, despite me telling her it was all I wanted for Christmas or my birthday. She didn't want me going into the city without her and there was no way she was going to sit through a game that I wasn't playing in.

A commotion downstairs let me know that the guys had arrived. I quickly grabbed my phone and wallet before heading downstairs where Dad, Mindy, and Ava sat in the living room and the guys, including Josh, stood in front of them.

Fox immediately spotted me and sent me one of his heart stopping smiles.

"Ready to go?" he asked me, causing the rest of the guys to notice me as well.

I enthusiastically nodded, walking over to the group.

"Hey, man," Ryan greeted me, slapping his hand down on my shoulder. "Happy birthday."

Due to the excitement of my first Bruins game, I nearly forgot that today was my actual birthday.

Dad stood up from the couch and buried me in his arms, causing the guys to poke fun at me.

"Happy birthday," Dad said, kissing the top of my head. "I can't believe my baby boy is eighteen now."

"Okay Dad," I said, trying to pull away from him.

Fox chuckled at my expense and walked over to me, tossing his arm around my shoulder. His touch was electric, like it had been for the last few days. Part of me felt like I should pull away, but the stronger part wanted to stay right under his arm.

"You ready to get going?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You boys be careful," Dad instructed, looking toward all of us.

"Let us know when you get there," Mindy added, nodding in agreement.

With that, the eight of us headed out to the cars, me getting in the passenger's seat of Fox's while Alex and Ian sat in the back. Josh took his car with Ryan, Jude, and Liam.

I couldn't keep the smile off my face as Fox pulled away from the curb and drove out of the neighborhood, Josh following closely behind.

"You excited?" Fox asked, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You're practically bouncing in your seat," Fox pointed out.

I let out an embarrassed chuckle. "I guess you could say I'm excited."

Fox's lips quirked up into a small smile and my eyes rested on the side of his face. I couldn't get over his smile.

"So you've never been to a B's game?" Alex suddenly asked, poking his head between Fox and me from the backseat.

My eyes averted from Fox and to Alex before I cleared my throat.

"No, I haven't," I said, causing Alex to give me a strange look.

"Weird. I'd have thought your Dad would've taken you. He's taken Josh," Alex nonchalantly replied, causing a squeezing pain in my chest.

I knew my father must've taken Josh before, but it still didn't hurt any less to realize Josh had gotten that bonding experience with Dad and I hadn't.

"Alex," Fox snapped in a warning tone.

I sighed. "My mom had a way of making sure I could never do anything fun," I admitted.

"Man, that sucks," Alex said. "Hey," he poked my shoulder.

"Hm?"

"Are you finally boinking Trevor?" Alex asked, "Fox said he saw you kissing him."

I turned my eyes back to Fox and my face hardened into a glare. His jaw was clenched and his eyes narrowed as he stared at the road in front of him.

"How often are you going to ask me that?" I asked Alex in an annoyed tone, my glare still set on Fox.

Alex shrugged. "Every so often until you tell me you are."

"Well, I'm not," I said, crossing my arms over my chest and looking straight ahead.

"Okay, I'll ask again in a few days," Alex replied, moving back to the back seat.

"You're so annoying," Ian told him.

Alex just shrugged again and smiled. "It's my specialty."

"And I wasn't *kissing* him," I clarified, looking toward Fox. He still looked tense, like he wanted to be talking about anything but this.

Fox scoffed and looked at me briefly with an annoyed, incredulous expression before turning his eyes back to the road.

"I *saw* you," Fox responded, almost angrily.

"I wasn't kissing his lips!" I nearly shouted.

"Woah, kinky," Alex added with a chuckle to which I turned around to shoot him a deadly glare before turning back to Fox.

Ian let out a loud groan. "Does it even fucking matter?"

"No, it doesn't," I said in a final tone, signaling I was done with this conversation.

Fox turned the radio up and the two of us rode the rest of the way to Boston in silence while Alex and Ian spoke in the backseat.

I couldn't get over how much Fox confused me. At one moment, he was doing nice things for me and I was swooning over him, but then at another he was inexplicably angry for no reason. At this moment, he was quietly steaming in his seat like a flame and if I got too close I would get burned.

Eventually we made it to the arena and Fox parked in the parking garage, Josh parking next to him.

"The traffic wasn't too bad," Josh commented as we all got out of the cars.

Fox just nodded and hummed in agreement, walking ahead of the group. I shook my head at him in annoyance as the rest of us followed him toward the arena.

I caught up to him just before we stopped to wait in line to enter.

"What's up with you?" I asked him quietly so that the rest of the guys wouldn't hear.

"Nothing," he muttered, trying to sound nonchalant but failing.

"Look, I don't know what your problem is, but can we deal with it later? Can we just
have a good time?"

Fox looked at me with a soft expression. "Yeah, we can do that."

"So we can talk about it later?" I asked.

"Yes, we can talk about it later," Fox replied as the line started moving forward.

I smiled widely at him to which he returned and the two of us led the rest of the guys into the building to get our tickets scanned. Once we were inside, I followed Fox to the seats.

"How did you get eight seats together?" I asked as I sat down beside him.

"My dad's company owns the row. When they don't use the tickets, they sell them," he answered.

I was surprised at how good the seats were. We were in the lower section with a perfect view of the ice.

"I hope it wasn't too much money," I said to him with my eyebrows raised.

Fox shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Wanna go get something to drink?"

I thought about it for a moment before nodding and standing up with Fox. He let the others know that we would be back before leading me out of the row and to the concessions. The line was pretty long considering people wanted to get their food and drinks before the game actually started.

Fox stood slightly in front of me with his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks for doing this by the way," I started, breaking the silence between the two of us, "I would've been happy with just a card."

Fox turned to me, quirking his lips up in slight smile and giving me an amused look.

"What kind of friend would I be if I just gave you a card for your birthday?"

A friend that didn't make my heart flutter, that was for sure.

When Fox and I got to the front of the line, he insisted on paying for my drink and I was too much at a loss for words to argue with him. He was making this feel like too much of a *date* for my heart to handle it.

As soon as we got back to our seats, Alex was complaining.

"You didn't get me anything?" he whined.

"Get it yourself," Fox replied, sitting back down in his seat. I sat back down beside him and slipped on my water.

"Everyone get up," Ryan commanded, standing up. "We have to take a picture in front of the ice for this momentous occasion."

Fox groaned, but stood up anyway after putting his drink in the cup holder. He motioned for me to follow him as the eight of us walked down the stairs toward the ice. Ryan handed his phone off to some woman and asked her to take a picture of us, which she seemed more than happy to do.

"Elijah in the middle," Jude said, waving me over.

Fox followed me and stood on my left while I stood between him and Ryan. I tensed slightly when Fox threw his arm around my shoulder, but relaxed when Ryan also put his arm around me. I gave a small smile for the picture and the woman seemed to take a few before handing the phone back to Ryan. He thanked her and we went back to our seats.

"We should start your instagram back up, Ellis," Ryan suggested, leaning over Jude and extending his arm across Alex to show me the picture.

I was pleasantly surprised with how the picture came out. We actually looked like a proper group of friends and I didn't stick out as the only one that didn't belong. I couldn't help but let my gaze linger on Fox with his arm around me.

The game turned out to be really fun and the Bruins actually won. During one of the intermissions, Ryan took my phone and downloaded instagram, forced me to log into it, then posted the picture of us from earlier without a caption, tagging each of the guys in it. He proceeded to follow himself and the other guys from my account.

"There," Ryan said, giving my phone back. "Now I can tag you in stuff and send you memes."

I probably wouldn't open instagram after today, but I nodded and let him believe I would.

After the game ended, Fox and Josh drove us all back to the house. Once we arrived, I said goodbye to Alex and Ian and waited for the two of them to get out of the car before addressing Fox.

"Can you come in for a few minutes?" I asked him. He gave me a strange look but nodded anyway, turning the car off.

Josh didn't say anything when he saw Fox following me up to the house but he gave me a wary glance. Ever since he found out about my feelings toward Fox he had been strange about the two of us together.

"Hey boys! How was the game?" Dad greeted as soon as we walked in. "Sorry to say I didn't see you guys on TV."

I laughed. "It was great."

"We're going to head out in a little bit for your birthday dinner," Dad told me. "You can come with us if you'd like, Fox."

I just looked to Fox with an apprehensive expression. We both knew that depended on how this conversation between us went.

"By the way thanks for organizing this, Fox," Dad said appreciatively, referencing the game.

Fox just shrugged. "It was no problem."

"Fox, can I talk to you before we leave?" I asked, bringing his attention toward me.

I notice Josh send me a wary glance, almost as if telling me not to, but I wasn't one to listen to Josh so I ignored him.

"Sure," Fox answered before following me up the stairs to my room.

Once we were both inside I poked my head out to make sure Josh wasn't going to come up here and eavesdrop before tightly shutting the door.

Fox stood in the middle of my room with his hands in his pockets, the look on his face telling me he was waiting for me to start speaking. Truth be told, I wasn't even sure where I wanted to begin.

"So about what happened in the car earlier. About Trevor..." I started.

Fox scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are we really going to do this right now?"

My eyes narrowed and I took a step closer to him.

" *You* said we could talk about this later," I told him, pointing at his chest.

"Yeah, but I thought later meant not today," Fox replied.

"Why would I say later if I meant a different day?" I asked, my voice going higher as my anger rose.

"Maybe I was just hoping that's what you meant," he admitted.

I felt my eye twitch in annoyance as I stared at Fox in disbelief. I took a deep breath, deciding not to argue with him about this. I'd rather talk about what we were here to to talk about.

I sighed. "What's going on with you?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about," Fox replied, causing me to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from blowing up at him.

"Yes you do," I tried to convince him. "You got mad the other night when you saw me with Trevor and then you went and told the guys that I was kissing him."

"I wasn't mad," he muttered, looking down at the floor.

"Yes you were," I told him. "And you were mad about it today when Alex brought it up."

Fox looked up and stared at me with a blank expression. His eyes looked around the room for a few moments and zeroed in on where I hung the painting Trevor had given me. He let out a sigh before looking back at me.

"I just don't like the idea of you two together," Fox confessed with a serious expression.

"We're not together," I hissed, trying to keep my voice down.

"But it seems like you will be," he countered.

"Why do you even care about my love life?" I spat. "I don't put my nose into yours."

Fox scoffed. "I don't even have a love life."

"Oh you don't? You and Claudia seem to be getting closer and closer," I argued, Fox's eyes widening.

" *What?* " he hissed. "You think I'm with Claudia? Seriously?"

"No... yes," I sighed, "I don't know."

Fox's expression softened and he took a step closer to me. "Well, I'm not."

"Okay, fine. I believe you. Now, will you believe me when I say that I'm not with Trevor?" I asked him with raised eyebrows.

Fox sighed. "You may not be with him now, but I can see it coming."

He wasn't doing much to stop my blood from boiling. I hated how he thought he had me all figured out, how he could never take my word for anything.

"And why does that even matter?" I nearly screeched. I wasn't worried much about the volume of my tone anymore. I was pissed off and I didn't care who knew it.

"Quiet down, Elijah," Fox said quietly, holding his hands out in front of him.

"Just tell me why, Fox! I'm sick of—"

I couldn't get the rest of the words out of my mouth before Fox took two strides and cupped my cheeks in his hands, placing his lips over mine. This wasn't the first time I'd kissed Fox, but this time was undeniably different. Before, I didn't know him, but now he was one of my favorite people.

His lips moved slowly over mine, almost like he was apprehensive and worried I was about to shove him away from me. I began to respond to his lips, quickening the pace a bit as I ran my fingers through his hair. When Fox realized I was enjoying the kiss, he quickened the pace as well and pushed me back so that I was leaning up against my door.

There was a familiarity about the kiss that comforted me, yet it was foreign. The kiss pushed a rush of adrenaline into my mouth and down my throat until there was heat in my stomach that went on and pulsed through my veins. It was a feeling so foreign, so unfamiliar, that it seemed out of reach, unattainable and out of reality.

Fox was the one to pull away first. He was breathless, his swollen lips separated only slightly as he searched for my reaction on my face.

"I don't want you to like Trevor," Fox told me, trying to catch his breath, "because I want you to like me."

I wordlessly stared at him. After my emotions toward Fox had been confusing me for days on end, *he* was the one admitting his feelings. It was

relieving to know that I wasn't the only one with these feelings.

"You don't have to like me back or whatever, and I'm sorry I'm a jealous fuck when it comes to you and Trevor—"

I didn't let him finish. Instead, I grabbed his face and brought his lips back to mine. Fox's natural confidence seemed to take over since I had initiated this kiss. He smirked into the kiss, bringing his hand up to cup my jaw.

"Elijah! We have to get going!" Dad called out from the bottom of the stairs.

I placed my hand on the center of Fox's chest and pushed him away from me. The two of us just stared at each other with wide eyes for a few moments before I turned around to open the door.

Fox grabbed my hand before I could, turning me around to face him.

"What does this mean?" he asked me in a hushed tone.

"I don't know," I admitted, staring at the intensity in his eyes.

"I guess we'll talk about it later?" he suggested with a coy smile to which I returned.

I nodded in agreement before the two of us left my room and headed downstairs. My family was waiting for me in the living room, staring at Fox and I as we descended the stairs.

"You're welcome to come with us, Fox," Mindy said kindly, my father nodding in agreement.

"I have to head home, but thank you," Fox politely declined. "Happy birthday, Elijah."

Fox left the house with a small smile and I couldn't help but watch him with one of my own as he went. Josh cleared his throat to grab my attention when he noticed me staring at Fox, but I didn't let him bother me. He had

no idea what had just happened between us. If he did, who knows what he would think.

**

I wanted to hold off on this because I just posted Wednesday but I was just TOO EXCITED.

WE FINALLY GOT A KISS. IT ONLY TOOK 24 CHAPTERS.

Please let me know what you think about the game, the talk with Fox and Elijah, and more importantly the KISS.

25

Sleep didn't come easy to me over the weekend. All I could think about was Fox, the feeling of his lips on mine, and what exactly that kiss meant. I couldn't tell if it was just a heat of the moment thing, or if Fox really wanted to be with me. I didn't even know if I wanted to be with him.

That was why I drowsily walked through the halls at school on Monday morning. My mind was tirelessly working and not giving me any chance at rest.

I found that being in Fox's presence was even worse for the thoughts swimming around in my head. Just the fact that he was sitting behind me in English class was enough to put a lump in my throat and a sickly feeling in my stomach. I practically launched myself out of my seat when the bell rang, but Fox was able to catch up with me.

"Hey, do you want to come over after practice tonight?" he asked, placing his hand on my shoulder to stop me. "So we can talk."

I looked up at him and nearly melted as his eyes intently stared into mine. All I could do was nod at him, and with that he walked off to his next class.

By the time hockey practice rolled around, I was anxious to go to Fox's house. I could tell Josh knew something was up with me, but I tried my best to avoid him so he wouldn't confront me about it.

As soon as I got on the ice, I skated over to Ian so the two of us could warm up with some drills. It became routine that we would do this before every practice. Not many words were exchanged between us, but I liked to think that he was warming up to me.

"What the hell is up with you?" Ian snapped as he slapped a shot toward me.

I stopped the puck with my stick and handled it for a few moments before hitting it back.

"What do you mean?"

"You're acting all jumpy. You keep tapping your foot and you're going to put a divot in the ice," Ian replied, motioning toward my tapping foot with his stick.

I didn't even notice I was doing it until he pointed it out. Once I looked down at my foot and realized that I *was* putting a divot in the ice, I immediately stopped.

Before I could say anything else, Coach Silva blew his whistle, causing the whole team to gather at center ice. Josh moved to stand beside me while Fox stood on my other side as we waited for instruction.

I couldn't tell if I was just more conscious of his presence now, but Fox seemed to be standing dangerously close to me. It was almost like he wanted a reaction out of me.

I almost groaned out loud when Coach Silva announced we would be working on penalty kill formations because Fox and I were on the same penalty kill unit and I didn't know how much I would be able to focus with him around me.

Coach had us working on a diamond formation where Fox was across from me. I put him in the back of my mind for the rest of practice. I wasn't going to let him be a distraction to me.

***

When Fox brought me over to his house, it appeared that his parents weren't home. He parked his car in the driveway, then motioned for me to follow him into the house.

I kept my distance from him as we walked together. I didn't know where our conversation was headed and I had no idea how to feel.

Once we were in the house, we were greeted by Fawn and Raven who were both sitting on the couch in the living room.

"Hey, Elijah," Fawn called out with a wave. I returned her greeting.

"Hello to you too," Fox sarcastically replied. His sister just waved him off.

"What's up guys?" Raven asked with a smile on her face.

"Just hanging out," Fox quickly responded. "We'll be up in my room."

Fox grabbed my arm to lead me up the stairs and the feeling of his skin on mine was doing nothing to help the unease I felt in this situation.

"There's leftovers in the fridge!" Raven called out as the two of us were already ascending the stairs.

When we got to his room, Fox pulled me inside and tightly shut the door behind us. We stood across from each other in silence for a few moments, neither of us knowing how to start this conversation.

"So..." Fox started, clearing his throat. "About the other day..."

I nodded, urging him to go on. I wanted to hear what he had to say before I said anything, hoping that would clear up at least some of the confusion I felt.

"I'm sorry I kissed you like that," Fox said with a sigh. "I lost my self control for a second. It was stupid."

My heart plummeted.

"It wasn't stupid," I muttered, looking down at the floor.

"That's not what I meant," Fox quickly assured me. "I just... fuck... I just shouldn't have done it like that."

"I'm not mad at you or anything," I told him, bringing my eyes back to his face.

Fox let his lips quirk up slightly in a smile and it was one of the greatest sights I had ever seen. He moved closer to me until he stood directly in front of me, tenderly placing his hand on my cheek.

"I should have done it more gracefully," he said in a low tone. "Instead of just throwing myself at you."

I chuckled. "I didn't mind."

"So what if I did it again now?" His voice was hopeful and light as his face moved closer to my own. I felt his breath on my cheeks, but he didn't let our lips touch, not until I told him he could.

"I wouldn't mind..."

That was all it took for Fox to close the rest of the distance between our faces and start kissing me slowly. This kiss was undeniably more romantic than our last. There was no rush or desperation, just pure desire and contentment.

It didn't take long for the two of us to end up on his bed. I was lying flat on my back while Fox hovered over me, one hand on my abdomen and the other on the side of my neck. I ran my hands under his shirt and felt the goosebumps form as he shivered from my cold touch.

"What does this mean for us?" Fox breathlessly asked as he pulled away from my lips slightly, his face still close enough to mine where I could feel his breath on my skin.

My gaze went from his parted lips to his wide eyes.

"What do you want it to mean?"

"Elijah..." Fox trailed. "I like you."

I didn't know whether to be thrilled at his words or frightened. No one had ever admitted to having feelings for me before, and I definitely had never felt this way about someone.

"Fox, I–"

Before I could finish my words, a loud knock boomed on the bedroom door, causing Fox and I to spring apart. No more than a second later, Ian walked into the room with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He seemed surprised to see the two of us sitting side by side on Fox's bed, but quickly made his expression impassive.

"Is it good if I crash here?" Ian asked in a bored tone.

Fox nodded, clearing his throat. "Yeah, you can use Wren or Robin's room."

"Which are you taking?" Ian directed toward me.

"Oh, uh, I'm not– I'm not staying here," I stuttered.

Ian raised an eyebrow, looking at the small distance between Fox and I, but didn't comment on it. I felt heat rise in my face like I was staring at the simmering sun.

"Maybe I should get going," I started, causing Fox and Ian to snap their gazed toward me. "I have homework–"

"Actually, Ellis, I meant to ask you for some help with the English homework," Ian responded, making his way over to the bed and sitting on my other side.

"Why me?" I asked with a look of confusion as he unzipped his bag and pulled out a folder.

"Aren't you a nerd?" he asked incredulously, causing Fox to let out a chuckle.

I sent them both annoyed looks, suddenly feeling more uncomfortable being so close to Fox while Ian was here. Ian seemed to pick up on my discomfort, sending a smirk over to Fox.

"Is he aware that I know you two fucked?"

These words sent me flying off the bed, an inhuman noise escaping my throat. I turned and looked at the two of them with wide eyes. Ian was sporting a boastful smile, the look foreign on his usual brooding face.

"You know *what?* " I screeched, my fingers frustratingly pulling on my hair as I stared at Ian in disbelief.

"Exactly what I said, Ellis," Ian told me with an exaggerated eye roll, leaning back on his hands. "Keep up."

This caused me to send my gaze toward Fox who looked as if he was trying to keep himself from laughing.

"You literally threatened to end me if anyone found out at the beginning of the year," I pointed out, crossing my arms over my chest as I waited for his explanation.

"Oh my God," Ian laughed, his smile meeting his eyes. I had never seen him so carefree besides maybe at the hotel pool a few weeks ago.

"When did you tell him?" I questioned Fox, placing my hands on my hips.

Fox sighed. "Are you actually mad at me right now?"

I let out a frustrated sigh, narrowing my eyes at Fox. "I'm not mad."

"You seem kinda mad," Ian pointed out.

"Shut up," I snapped.

Truly, I wasn't angry at Fox. I was just confused as hell. He had been so against anyone finding out about us before, but then he turned around and told Ian as if it was no big deal. I was getting mixed signals from him.

"When did you tell him?" I repeated after taking a calming breath, my tone lighter.

"The night of your birthday," Fox admitted. "After I... kissed you."

"He called me and forced me to come over here just so he could whine about how you probably hated him," Ian remarked, earning himself a smack in the shoulder from Fox.

"I told him I kissed you," Fox continued, shaking his head at Ian. "So he started asking questions so I told him about what happened between us this summer."

"But why were you so against anyone finding out about us at the beginning of the year?" I exaggeratedly asked. This still wasn't adding up to me.

Fox stood up and walked over to me, grabbing onto my hand that I didn't even notice was nervously pulling on my hair.

"Because I was scared," he told me. "And I didn't have feelings for you then."

I couldn't help but let a smile creep onto my face at his words, feeling the warmth of my hand in his.

"As touching as this is, I still need your help. Get over here Ellis," Ian interrupted, waving his English notebook at me.

There was still more to discuss, but it would have to wait until Ian was gone.

After practically doing his English homework for him, Ian left the room to go to bed. Once Fox and I were alone, there was a strange feeling in the room. It was like both of us wanted to say something, but neither could figure out how.

"How much did you tell Ian?" I asked in a quiet tone, still not over the fact that someone else knew about our past.

Fox sighed, leaning back against his headboard. "I just told him how we met at that club... and that we, uh, hooked up in your car."

Right, the car my mother took away and sold when she threw me out without ever having knowing exactly what I did in there.

I visibly cringed at Fox's words. While I had no regrets about the situation, it was still disconcerting that Ian knew about it.

"Look, Elijah," Fox said, placing his hand on my leg to grab my attention. I looked at him with a shy expression.

"You don't have to like me back or anything," Fox continued. "If that's what's bothering you."

"It's not that," I quickly clarified. "It's just— I just don't know what to think."

My feelings for Fox were confusing. I knew I liked him and I liked kissing him. Just being around him created a type of warmth in my body that I had never felt before. He made me feel safe and wanted.

But I didn't know if I was ready for a relationship. I had my own insecurities to work through.

"We don't have to talk about it right now," Fox said in a soft tone.

I gave him an appreciative smile, turning to face him completely and placing my hand over his.

"Can I kiss you?" I asked him, nearly breathless.

Fox smiled widely and answered me by connecting our lips. We both smiled into the kiss and I couldn't help but let an small laugh leave my lips.

The feeling of kissing him was something I never wanted to let go of. I knew that years down the line I would never forget this feeling. The warmth in my stomach, the softness of his lips, the sweet taste on my tongue, the state of elation and bliss.

It was like we were the only two in the world.

"Do you want to stay over?" Fox murmured against my lips.

I pulled away from him, our faces still close enough to be nearly touching.

"I should go home," I replied, though I didn't want to. I knew I shouldn't confuse myself more by kissing Fox all night and sleeping in his bed.

"I'll drive you," he offered, getting up from the bed to shrug on a jacket.

I followed Fox out of his room and down the stairs, then out to his car. We didn't say anything, but we didn't have to. Being around each other was comfortable enough that a silence like this didn't bother either of us.

"It's probably stupid to even mention this," I started, grabbing Fox's attention as he started driving toward my house. "But Josh knows that I– that I like you."

"He does?" Fox asked in an amused tone.

I sent him an annoyed glare.

"It's not funny," I told him. "Yeah, he knows."

"So you told him that you like me?" The stupid smile on Fox's handsome face only annoyed me more. I couldn't tell if I wanted to punch him or kiss him.

"He asked," I said in a low tone.

This seemed to surprise Fox as he quirked his head to the side and lifted his eyebrows.

"He did?"

I nodded. "I guess it was obvious and you were oblivious."

"Funny," Fox sarcastically replied. "But he doesn't know about us?"

"No, I'm not a blabber mouth like you," I teased.

Fox let out a quiet laugh. "Okay, because I'm still not— I still don't think I'm ready to—"

"Come out?" I finished his thought.

He sighed as he nodded and let out a quiet, "Yeah."

I didn't know what to think about Fox's confession, so I stayed silent. I knew I wasn't ready for a relationship, and he wasn't ready to come out, so it seemed like nothing would even come of this. The thought discouraged me.

"Thanks for driving me home," I said as he pulled up to my house.

"No problem," he replied.

The two of us stared at each other for what seemed like hours. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his. He was too captivating and intriguing. It was like he was a view of a sunset over the ocean. Beautiful and majestic.

"So, I'll see you at school tomorrow?" Fox asked, bringing my attention away from his enchanting gaze.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

With a hesitant wave goodbye, I got out of the car and scurried into the house where Dad and Mindy were waiting for me in the living room.

"Have a good night?" Dad asked, turning the TV off.

"Uh, yeah," I said, my voice quiet and distant.

"Everything okay?" Mindy asked, a look of concern on her face.

"I'm just tired. I'm going to head to bed," I told them before bounding up the steps and into my room where I was surprised to see Josh and Ava.

"What are you two doing in here?" I asked them suspiciously.

"Waiting for you," Ava replied as if she was stating the obvious.

I looked to Josh with a confused expression. "But why?"

"Is it so bad that we want to hang out with our brother?" Josh asked with an amused smile.

I chuckled, not knowing what to say. It was no secret that we weren't the closest of siblings, but it would be a lie if I said it didn't make me feel more at home to hear Josh call me his brother.

"Dude, you need to do something about this room," Ava pointed out, plopping herself down on my bed. "It's so plain in here. All you have is that weird painting."

I looked to where she was pointing at the painting Trevor had gotten me that I hung on my wall above my desk.

"It's not weird," I said, sitting down beside her. "Trevor got it for my birthday."

"Is that your *boyfriend* ?" Ava asked in an exaggerated tone.

"Trevor wishes," Josh added with a scoff, sitting himself down at the foot of my bed. "Were you with Fox all night?"

"And Ian," I said, sending him a sideways glance.

Ava sighed, grabbing the attention from Josh and me. She hopped off the bed and started walking toward the door.

"Elijah, you took too long to come home and now I'm tired," she said. "Goodnight!"

"She wanted to watch a scary movie," Josh told me after Ava left the room.

"You guys didn't have to wait up for me," I replied, feeling slightly guilty.

"We wanted to," Josh said. "It's not a big deal. We can watch something tomorrow night. If you don't already have plans..."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't."

"Alright, so now you do. With me and Ava," Josh responded with a grin before getting off my bed and leaving my room.

Since Josh left, I was alone with my thoughts. All I could do was stare up at the ceiling with an inexplicable feeling in my chest and a pit in my stomach, thinking about Fox. My mind wandered to the first time we had met.

**

Nerves tickled my insides as I sat in my car in front of the club. It was always a hassle trying to find LGBT clubs that were far enough way from home where I didn't have to worry about seeing anyone who would know who I am but close enough so I wouldn't have to drive for hours.

Maybe this was a bad idea. I couldn't push my nerves out and the paranoia about using my fake ID wasn't making the situation any easier.

As I watched more and more people heading inside, I took a deep breath and got out of the car, slowly making my way toward the club. It turned out I had nothing to worry about because the bouncer looked at my ID for all of three seconds before handing it back to me and allowing me inside.

The atmosphere was just as I expected, carefree and fun. There was something about being around people like me that made me feel like a whole new version of myself. I felt confident and unashamed.

The dance floor was packed but it didn't bother me like I thought it would. I danced around with a few guys and made out with some of them for a while before one particular guy caught my eye.

He was talking to someone else, but he looked so good while he was doing it that I couldn't take my eyes off of him. It was then that he noticed me staring and sent a smirk my way.

Too embarrassed to walk over there, I spun around and started dancing with a guy that was standing close to me. It was only a few minutes later when I felt someone place their hand on my arm. When I turned around to

face him, I noticed I was standing face to face with the guy who had caught me staring.

"You didn't want to come over?" he asked with that same handsome smirk on his face.

"I... uh—"

"I was hoping you would," he said, his hand still on my arm.

"You looked busy," I told him, motioning my head toward the guy he was talking with earlier.

"I'm not now," he replied with a grin. "The name's Nick."

"Elijah."

He moved closer to me, placing his hand on my back. "You're really cute, Elijah."

I didn't have the chance to say anything before his lips were on mine. The kiss was not something I would have expected from someone so attractive. It was sloppy and tasted of alcohol. His lips chased mine as I backed away from him.

"I'm going to go," I rushed out.

"C'mon," he said in a whiny tone, gripping my arm.

"No," I said more forcefully, ripping my arm out of his grasp and scurrying away toward the bar to sit down.

I sat down and rested my elbows on the table, placing my head in my hands. I looked up again and noticed the guy I sat next to was staring at me with an attractive scowl on his face. After I looked at him, he looked away and took a long sip of his drink.

The guy looked like he would rather be anywhere but here.

"Do you have to stare at me?" he snapped, turning to face me.

I scoffed. "You seem pleasant."

"Shut up."

"Why are you here if you're just going to sit alone at the bar?" I asked in an amused tone.

"Why did you come running over here like a bat out of hell?" he countered, matching my tone.

We each shared a glare before our expressions softened. It was then that I noticed how truly handsome this guy was. Much better than the idiot I was with before.

"Have you been here before?" I asked him.

"Just once," he replied, taking another sip of his drink.

"Do you like it?"

"No."

"You're no fun," I told him.

He just shook his head at me.

"I'm Elijah," I introduced myself.

"Fox."

"I like that name," I complimented.

"I don't," he muttered, finishing off his drink.

"You don't seem to like anything," I said with a laugh. I was surprised when he actually laughed at what I said. It wasn't a full laugh, more like a small chuckle, but it was something.

"If you hate it here so much, do you want to go somewhere else?" I asked, not knowing where this confidence was coming from. I just felt like this guy wouldn't judge me.

He pondered on it for a minute before nodding. After he paid his tab, the two of us made our way out to my car. We didn't say anything as I drove out of the club parking lot. Eventually, I fond a McDonald's drive thru and we got some ice cream before I parked in a dark parking lot away from the road.

"This is stupid," Fox said after a few moments.

"What is?" I asked, shoveling a spoonful of ice cream into my mouth.

"I don't even know you and I just got into your car. You could be some fucking weirdo," he said.

I laughed. "So could you."

"True," Fox replied with a slight laugh of his own.

"I just think both of us don't fit into that scene," I said to which he nodded. "It's hard finding people you fit in with while you're still in the closet."

"Yeah," he agreed. "It's like that's the only place I can go and I don't even like it there."

"Have you ever thought about coming out?"

"No," he immediately answered. "I can't."

"I've been thinking about it," I said. "I'm just so tired of living a secret life."

"If you want to do it, you should," Fox encouraged.

"Yeah, maybe I should."

We made small talk while we finished our ice cream as a rock station played quietly on the radio. Once we were done eating, we put the empty cups into

the cup holders and rested our heads on our head rests, staring into each other's eyes. His eyes were so inviting. I could feel myself leaning closer, but I worried he would reject me.

He seemed to be contemplating in his mind before he closed the distance and our mouths met in the middle. This kiss was so much better than the others I'd had that nice. It was rough, but still a good pace and not nearly as sloppy. Eventually our tongues found each other as the kiss got more heated.

Fox pulled away so that he could lift his shirt off and I copied his actions before reconnecting our lips. I brought my hands onto his chest as his caressed the sides of my neck. My hands eventually found their way down to his jeans and slowly began to unbutton them, giving him the chance to stop me if he wanted to.

He groaned into my mouth and brought his hands down to my jeans. We pulled apart to take our jeans off and I motioned for him to come into the back seat with me. We climbed over the center console and I was lying back on the seat as Fox hovered over me, kissing my jaw and my neck, eliciting sounds of pleasure from me.

Soon enough, all of our clothes were discarded and we finished what we started.

***

Driving Fox back to the club after we had finished was relatively awkward as we sat in silence the whole way there until he directed me toward his car in the parking lot.

"That was fun," I said as I parked next to him.

"It was," he said, clearing his throat.

We stared at each other for a few moments before we were kissing again. We must have made out for at least twenty minutes before we parted and Fox left my car to get into his.

I waited for him to drive off before I let out a long sigh and rested my head back on the headrest.

I had a feeling I would be thinking about that guy for a long time.

**

Hello everyone! Thanks for reading.

Now you finally know how Elijah and Fox hooked up for the first time. Let me know what you think about that.

What did you think about Elijah and Fox's "talk" and the fact that Fox had told Ian about the two of them? What about Josh and Ava wanting to hang with Elijah?

Let me know!

26

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

It was surprising to me that after all of the confusion I went through the past few days I was still able to focus during our hockey game on Friday night. I could practically feel my father cringing from where he sat in the stands due to the amount of shots I had blocked and the way I was finishing my checks. Surely, I would be sore later, but at that moment it didn't matter. I was having a hell of a game.

We were up 2-0 in the third period when I skated for the puck and ended up being shoved into the boards from behind. I fell to the ice as I heard a whistle being blown and a commotion behind me. I slowly turned my head to see that Fox was shoving the player that had hit me as the ref tried to hold him back. Quickly, I got to my feet and made my way to him, grabbing onto his jersey and pulling him away.

"We're about to get a power play, don't mess it up," I said as his eyes searched my face.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, looking as if he was searching for any visible injuries.

We didn't have time to say anything else as we had to get in formation to continue the game. Fox won the face off, like he seemed to always do, and passed it back to Josh who then passed it back to me. I didn't have a clear shot so I whipped the puck back to Fox. As soon as the puck hit his stick, he redirected it directly into the back of the net.

The five of us that were on the ice gathered in a huddle for celebration before skating back to the bench.

"Ellis," Coach Silva called out. "Do you want to sit for the rest of the game?"

"No, I'm good," I told him with a reassuring smile.

"You've had a lot of time on ice tonight," he pointed out. "It's okay if you're tired, especially after that hit you took."

I just reassured him again that I didn't need to sit out. However, he only put me in for one more shift before the game ended.

"Alright boys good win tonight," Coach Silva congratulated us. "After tonight we have officially clinched a spot in the Masters Tournament up in Maine."

This caused a chorus of cheers throughout the locker room. The Masters Tournament was the biggest hockey tournament in New England. Only the best teams got a shot and the winner won some funding for their team. I had been before with my old team. It was challenging, but it was a good time.

Coach Silva finished talking and allowed us to leave. I took a quick shower then met Josh back out in the locker room.

It turned out that *Ava* had plans the other night and couldn't participate in our movie night, so we changed it to tonight.

"Are you coming out with us tonight?" Fox asked, walking up behind me with just a towel around his waist. It took all my will power to keep my eyes on his face.

"Can't," I replied, clearing my throat. "I have plans with Josh and Ava."

Fox seemed surprised by this, but didn't comment on it. Instead, he nodded and dropped his towel on the bench before getting dressed. I felt my cheeks heat up and figured Fox only did that to mess with my head. He knew *exactly* what he was doing.

"Ready to go?" Josh asked me from my other side.

"I guess I'll see you guys later," Fox said before I could answer Josh. He smirked at me and patted me on the shoulder before leaving the locker room.

"What was that about?" Josh questioned, motioning toward Fox.

I let out a deep breath, trying to get the heat out of my face before anyone could notice.

"Nothing," I lied. "Let's just go."

Josh didn't look like he believed me as he sent a skeptical look my way, but I kept my gaze forward as the two of us walked out to the car. We didn't speak on the ride home, but the silence between us was comfortable as the music flowed throughout the car.

"Great game tonight, boys," Dad greeted us as soon as we walked in the door. He was dressed up in a button down shirt with slacks, looking as if he was getting ready to leave.

"Why are you dressed up so nice?" I asked, pointing at his attire.

Dad looked down at his clothes with a smile. "It's date night!"

Just as he said that, Mindy came rushing down the stairs in a knee-length red dress and high-heels, shoving a dangling earring into her ear.

"And there is my beautiful wife," Dad said, holding out his arm for her to take.

Mindy looped her arm through his before looking toward Josh and me.

"You boys will be good, right?" Mindy asked, staring us both down. "No parties, that goes for Ava too. Make sure she behaves."

"We got it, Mom," Josh answered.

"Good, good," Mindy replied before turning to yell up the stairs, "Ava! We're leaving!"

Ava just let out an incoherent response from her room.

Mindy pulled Josh's face toward her to give him a kiss on the cheek before giving me the same treatment.

"We'll be back later," Dad said, looking down at Mindy with a smile. "Don't wait up."

And with that the two of them left.

"What are you up for watching tonight?" Josh asked as the two of us walked up the stairs.

I shrugged. "Anything. Maybe Ava should pick."

Josh nodded in agreement before the two of us separated to our own rooms to get changed. Once I was in some comfier clothes, I met Josh and Ava downstairs in the living room where the two were arguing over a movie.

"Why do you always have to pick out messed up movies?" Josh questioned her with a slightly irritated look.

"You told me to pick so I picked!" Ava shouted back. "I picked what I like!"

I looked to the TV to see that Netflix was pulled up to a movie called *Creep*
.

"Are we going to watch or what?" I asked them, trying to break up their fight. I walked between the two of them to take a spot on the couch.

"Fine, whatever," Josh grumbled, sitting down beside me. "But Mom and Dan will be pissed at us if they find out we let you watch this weird shit."

Ava sat down on my other side and shot Josh a dirty look.

"This is why Elijah is my favorite brother," she told him.

I smirked over at Josh who just shook his head as he pressed play on the remote.

The movie was weird right off the bat and Josh didn't hesitate to voice his distaste, Ava ignoring him. Josh watched the entire movie with a look of discomfort while Ava sprawled out across the couch, throwing her legs over my lap.

"That was stupid," Josh said as the credits came up on the screen.

"I'm done with your negativity tonight," Ava said, standing up from the couch. "Goodnight favorite brother and Josh."

I chuckled as she walked away, kicking Josh's shin as she went by him.

"You agree with me, don't you?" Josh asked, rubbing his shin.

"It was weird," I agreed with a laugh.

"I don't know why she likes those kinds of movies," Josh mumbled as he looked through Netflix for something else to watch.

He settled on some random reality show and the two of us watched in silence until Josh decided to speak up.

"So is everything going okay?" he wondered in a soft tone.

I gave him a strange look. "Yeah?"

"I mean, like–" he sighed, running a hand through his hair "with Fox. You're okay? Even with your... feelings?"

I couldn't help but laugh at Josh's question, even though I didn't even know if I was okay with everything. My feelings for Fox were confusing, and the state of our relationship was even more so after her admitted his feelings. But I couldn't say that to Josh.

"Everything's fine," I assured him.

He didn't look convinced.

"Seriously," I told him. "He knows I like him. He's cool with it."

"He knows?" I thought Josh's eyes were going to fall out of his head he opened them so wide.

I nodded. "I told him. He's cool. It's fine."

"Oh," he said. "Good."

I nodded again and the two of us continued to watch what he had put on.

"We should do this more often, the three of us," I suggested, causing Josh to send a surprised look my way.

Even though it was hard for me to admit, it was nice hanging out with my siblings. It made this place feel more like a home rather than just a place I slept.

"Yeah, we should," Josh agreed. "Ava's not picking every time though."

I laughed. "Definitely not."

Josh and I stayed on the couch a little while longer and eventually, he fell asleep. It wasn't long after that when my phone lit up with a message from Fox.

From: Fox
You busy?

I looked at Josh's sleeping figure for a moment before replying.

To: Fox
No, why?

From: Fox
Do you want to hang out for a little while?

I smiled down at the message and quickly replied that I would like to see him. It didn't take long for Fox to show up. I turned the TV off and headed out the door, locking it behind me.

"Hey," Fox said as I let myself into his car.

A small smile crept onto my face as I buckled up.

"Hey."

The street light above us illuminated his tan skin, making it hard for me to look away. He wore his glasses that framed his face perfectly, making him look even more attractive. His lips were quirked up slightly on one side as he stared back at me with a deep gaze, his head resting on the headrest.

"Is there a reason you wanted to hang out?" I asked him, matching his expression.

"Just wanted to see you," he told me in a low voice.

The fluttering in my stomach was almost unbearable, as if itching at me to remind me just how I felt about the guy in front of me.

"Are we just going to sit in my driveway or do you have something planned?" I asked with a quiet chuckle.

Fox rolled his eyes and put the car in reverse. "I don't have anything planned."

He pulled out of the driveway and started out of the neighborhood.

Fox rested his arm on the center console, placing his hand on the shifter. I contemplated placing my hand on his, but couldn't find the courage to do it. He must've seen the pondering look on my face out of the corner of his eye because he reached out and grabbed my hand in his, placing both of them on the center console.

My cheeks flushed but I couldn't help but grin at him.

"Have I ever told you I like your glasses?" I asked, earning another eye roll from him.

"You have."

"They're hot," I added, my grin widening.

Fox smirked. "Are they?"

I hummed in confirmation, nodding my head.

"I guess I should wear them more often then," he replied.

"You should," I agreed. "But then you'd be attracting *a lot* more attention."

"So I should only wear them for you then?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"Yeah, that would work."

Fox chuckled at my words before pulling into an empty parking lot at the local park. I had only been here a few times, but the park was undoubtedly more eerie at night. If I was alone, I would be paranoid, but being with Fox calmed me.

A low rock song played on the radio as Fox parked the car underneath a streetlight. Once parked, we turned to face each other. The glasses on his face almost made the scar above his eyebrow unnoticeable. That blemish on his skin was the only thing that seemed out of place on his otherwise perfect face, but it didn't make him any less handsome.

"I really want to kiss you," I blurted before I could stop myself. I was too enamored by him to filter my thoughts.

A coy smile took over his face. "So do it."

Less than a second later, my lips were on his and his cheek was caressed by my hand. The kiss was slow, our lips moving together at a matching pace. It was like they wanted to get to know each other, to know every inch. It wasn't long before Fox slipped his tongue in my mouth and let out a moan. I couldn't keep myself from doing the same thing.

The pace never quickened, but eventually Fox pulled away and attached his lips to my neck, kissing up to my jaw.

"Fox..." I said in a breathless voice as he sucked on a sensitive area of skin. That only encouraged him to continue.

My fingers tangled in his hair as he continued kissing me, moving from my jaw, down to my neck and then my collarbone. I let out a flustered breath before bringing his face back up to mine to press our lips together again. I could feel Fox smile into the kiss as his hand moved down to my hip, dangerously close to my front.

"I'm not hooking up with you in a car again," I breathlessly mumbled against his lips.

"Fine, I'll be good," Fox replied, moving his hand away.

Fox and I spent at least another half hour making out in his car before deciding to head back to my house. It was later than I thought, already past midnight. Dad and Mindy were sure to be home by now and they wouldn't be too happy with me if they found out I was out this late without telling them.

"Shit," I muttered as Fox pulled up to the curb in front of my house.

"What?" Fox asked, putting the car in park.

"I left my key inside," I told him as I sifted through my pockets, hoping for the key to turn up.

"I can get you inside," Fox said, causing me to tilt my head in confusion.

"What?"

"You can get in through your window. Josh used to use it to sneak out," he told me with a shrug.

"Josh sneaks out?"

"When we were younger before we had cars and later curfews," Fox clarified.

That didn't seem like Josh. He was too much of a rule-follower. I guess I didn't know him as well as I thought.

Fox got out of the car and motioned for me to follow him around the back of the house toward my bedroom window. Josh's window was at the front of the house with no way to get in or out while mine was at the back above the back porch and a low section of the roof.

"Unless you've locked your window, it's not locked," Fox said as we stood below it.

I rolled my eyes. "Great."

Fox laughed. "I'll boost you up and make sure you don't fall."

As Fox cupped his hands, I placed my foot in them to boost myself up on the railing. I definitely could've done this myself, but I wasn't going to deny any help from Fox.

Once I was up, Fox stepped on the floor of the deck so he could reach up and place his hands on my sides. As I pulled myself up onto the roof, Fox's hands fell to my ass. I looked down at him with a glare to which he held his hands up in defense.

"My hands slipped," he said with a cheeky grin.

I rolled my eyes. "Sure..."

I turned around and quietly made my way toward the window. Luckily, the window was unlocked and I pulled it open with ease, letting myself in my room. Once I was safely inside, I looked out the window to send Fox a wave to which he returned before walking back to his car.

After changing and getting ready for bed, an instagram notification popped up on my phone. I assumed it was just Ryan sending me some meme that I wouldn't understand like he had been since he started up my account again, but the message I received was much worse.

Heard you made it to the masters. didn't think they'd let faggots in. you might wanna be careful when we see you there...

The message from an old teammate caused a lump in my throat and all of a sudden, my messages were flooded with hateful warnings from my old team.

I shut the phone off and threw it down on my nightstand, my heart beating fast.

My head wouldn't be clear for the rest of the night.

**

So sorry I didn't update yesterday! I had a really busy day yesterday. Hope everyone's Valentines was good :) What did you think about Elijah hanging out with Josh and Ava? And his night with Fox? What about the messages?

Let me know!

27

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur, brief mentions of suicide When I woke up the next morning, it felt like I hadn't slept at all. The music from the kitchen told me breakfast was being made by Dad and Mindy.

I hoped that the messages I received the night before were just pieces of a dream, but when I saw my phone turned off facing down on my nightstand, I knew that wasn't the case.

I dragged myself out of bed, throwing the covers off of me and leaving my phone in my room as I headed to the bathroom. After using the bathroom and washing my hands, I looked at myself in the mirror and immediately let out a curse.

"Fuck..." I muttered as my eyes zeroed in on the bruises that ran from my collarbone up to the side of my neck. There was even a faint one under my jaw that no shirt would be able to cover.

I rustled through the cabinets in the bathroom, hoping to find something to cover the bruises with but coming up with nothing.

"Hurry up!" Ava yelled through the door, pounding on it with her fist.

I pulled open the door. "Do you have makeup?"

"Do I look like I have makeup?" she rudely asked, pushing past me. "Who the hell did you let attack your neck?"

"It's not important," I muttered. "Does Mindy have makeup?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I can't let her see me like this!" I told her.

Ava just glared at me and pushed on my shoulders lightly to guide me out of the bathroom.

"Maybe you shouldn't have let your boyfriend attack your neck," she said before slamming the door in my face.

I quickly went back to my room before anyone else in the house could see me and threw on a sweatshirt that would cover most of my bruises. Just as I finished putting it on, there was a faint knock on my door.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Can I come in?" Josh's voice asked from the other side.

Instead of answering, I walked to the door and opened it, stepping aside so he could come in.

"What's up?"

"Wanna go out tonight?" he asked me, sitting down on my bed.

"And do what?"

I was intentionally standing far enough away from him so he hopefully wouldn't notice the blemishes on my skin.

He shrugged. "Get something to eat? I don't know. My plans got cancelled."

"Who were your plans with?"

"Emma," he said with a sigh.

I sent him a puzzled look. "I don't know who that is."

"You've never met her?" he asked and I shook my head. "She's a girl I'm kinda seeing but not really."

I wracked my brain to try to remember ever meeting this girl, but couldn't find the memory.

"Does she sit with you at lunch?" I asked him.

"Sometimes," he said with a nod.

"I don't know her."

Josh just rolled his eyes and stood up from my bed.

"Are we getting dinner tonight or not?" he asked as he walked toward my door.

I nodded. "Yeah. Is your mom home?"

"Yes?"

"Okay, you can leave now," I told him with an awkward smile.

Josh muttered something under his breath before leaving my room and shutting the door. I waited a few moments before I tip-toed out of the room and down the stairs. The music was loud enough where I wouldn't be heard. I peeked around the corner to see both Dad and Mindy dancing around the kitchen as bacon, eggs, and hash browns cooked.

When I made eye contact with Mindy, I held my finger up to my mouth to keep her from greeting me, then I motioned for her to come out of the kitchen. She gave me an unreadable expression before saying something to Dad and then leaving the kitchen to stand by me out of sight.

"Can you help me?" I asked her in a whisper, pointing to my neck.

I really didn't want to have to have her see my bruises but I was immensely more concerned with my Dad seeing them. So, if I had to enlist Mindy for help, I would.

She motioned for me to follow her up to her her room.

"Are you at least being safe?" she asked once we were in her bedroom.

"Nothing happened," I muttered, crossing my arms over my chest.

Mindy raised her eyebrows like she didn't believe me.

"I'm serious!"

"Sure you are," she replied in a disbelieving tone, pulling her makeup bag out of her nightstand. "Sit."

I sat down on the bed and moved my shirt so she could get to all of the bruises.

"Jesus," she muttered, patting my skin with a makeup sponge. "You're lucky your father didn't see this."

"I know."

"I'll keep my mouth shut if you *promise* you're being safe," she said with a chuckle.

I rolled my eyes. "I promise."

Mindy just chuckled again as she finished covering up my blemishes, spraying something to make sure the makeup stayed on.

"You're the best," I told her.

"I know," she replied, kissing the top of my head before I stood up from the bed.

The two of us went back to the kitchen, my father not suspicious about our disappearance and arrival together.

"Elijah! Come eat. I think we overdid it this morning," Dad called out with a sheepish look.

"Smells amazing," I told him with a smile.

Dad placed a plate full of food in front of me and I spent the rest of breakfast hoping he wouldn't notice my neck.

***

When Ava told me she was having a sleepover with Fawn Ridley, I was undeniably surprised. I wasn't aware that the two girls had kept in contact since Fox and I took them to the mall a few weeks ago.

"Do you have everything?" I asked Ava as she stomped down the stairs to meet me in the living room.

"Yes, *Dad* ," she sarcastically replied.

" *Hey* ," I whined. "Be nice to me. I'm your favorite brother."

Ava just snickered as she walked by me and out to the car. Josh came down the stairs a few moments later and motioned for me to follow him.

Ever since our first movie night, Josh and I had been talking more. We still weren't super close, but I was actually kind of proud of our progress, so I suggested the two of us hang out tonight while Ava spent the night at the Ridley's.

"I'm surprised you sat in the backseat," I told Ava as I got into the car, Josh getting in the driver's seat.

"Didn't want to hear you complain," she responded in a bored tone.

I laughed as she sent me a sarcastic smile and Josh headed toward the Ridley household. It didn't take long for us to get there and Ava was quick to get out of the car as soon as we arrived.

"She really didn't wanna hang with us any longer," Josh joked.

"Nah, just you," I replied with a laugh while Josh shoved my shoulder.

We watched as Ava went up to the house and Fawn opened the door for her, letting her inside. Just as Josh was about to drive, a light in the backseat caught my attention.

"Wait," I said, causing Josh to stop. "Ava left her phone."

I reached into the backseat and grabbed the phone before taking my seatbelt off and opening the door.

"I'll be right back," I said to which Josh just nodded.

I jogged up to the Ridley house, shivering as the cold air hugged my skin and cursing myself for not bringing a heavier jacket. I waited on the porch after knocking on the door and a few moments later, Fox opened it, looking handsome as ever.

"Hey?" he greeted me, quirking his eye brow in confusion.

"Ava left her phone in the car," I said, holding it out for him to take.

"Okay, I'll give it to her," Fox said, taking the phone out of my hand.

"Thanks."

I was about to turn and leave when Fox stopped me.

"You haven't been answering my texts," Fox called out. "Or my calls."

I knew he was basically asking me if I was ignoring him after what happened last night, but he didn't want to come out and say it.

"My phone is off," I told him.

"Why?"

"Just wanted to turn it off for a bit," I said.

Fox hummed and nodded.

"You should come in for a bit," he suggested, his voice sounding inviting. I almost eagerly accepted his offer before realizing Josh was waiting for me.

"Josh is in the car," I told him, pointing back with my thumb.

Fox pursed his lips, his eyes darting back to where the car waited and then back to my face.

"Shame," he said in a low tone. "Should've known though because I know you wouldn't put Ava's life in danger by driving her yourself," he teased with a coy smile.

I rolled my eyes and shoved him on the shoulder.

"I'm *not* a bad driver," I reminded him.

"Hm okay, whatever you say," Fox teased. "What are you and Josh doing tonight?"

"Just going out."

"Just the two of you?"

I hummed to confirm.

"Like a date?"

I instantly shot Fox a disgusted look. "Ew."

Fox chuckled. "I'm just messing with you. But you know I'm the jealous type..."

"Bye," I abruptly replied, rolling my eyes.

Fox's loud laughter echoed through the air as I briskly made my way back to the car, my body instantly warming when I was inside.

"What were you guys talking about?" Josh asked, pulling away from the curb.

"Nothing. I just stood there and admired his pretty face," I replied.

Josh let out a breathy laugh, shaking his head at me.

"Are you taking me to the place you were going to take Emma?" I asked as the thought occurred to me.

Josh stared blankly ahead. "I had a reservation," he muttered.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Why is she standing you up?"

"She's not standing me up," he replied. "Her grandmother needed help tonight."

I wasn't convinced. "Okay..."

"Shut up," Josh said with a sigh.

Once we got to the restaurant we were seated pretty quickly thanks to Josh's reservation. The service was speedy and we had our food in no time.

"Trevor's over there," I pointed out. He looked like he was having dinner with his parents and his sister.

Josh slowly chewed his food, looking increasingly uncomfortable and lowering his head as if trying not to be seen.

"Why are you so uncomfortable around him?" I asked in a curious tone. I was truly more curious than annoyed with him. The way he was toward Trevor never really made any sense to me.

Josh sighed and looked away from me for a moment as if he was trying to get out of this conversation.

"Look," Josh started, returning his gaze to me. "I didn't tell you this before because we weren't really close and you were friends with Trevor and I thought you were going to end up dating him."

"Tell me what?"

"He used to have a crush on me Freshman year," Josh admitted.

"Okay?"

That didn't seem like a big deal. Austin had a crush on him now and never acted this way around him.

"He would always come around me and tried to get close to me and when I eventually found out he had a crush on me, I said some things to him I regret," Josh confessed, looking down at his plate in disappointment.

"Why don't you just apologize?" I suggested, taking a bite of my pasta.

Josh scoffed. "Like he would accept my apology."

"He probably would. Trevor's a good guy," I told him.

"Would you accept an apology from your old team? From your mom?" Josh questioned me, his tone sharpening slightly as he looked back up toward me.

"Those are completely different situations," I denied. "Unless you beat him, called him every homophobic slur known to man, and kicked him out of his house, then the situations are different."

"I didn't do any of that," Josh instantly replied.

"Then you should probably just apologize," I assured him with an eye roll.

"I told him to never speak to me again," Josh continued. "And he hasn't."

I took a moment to focus on Josh's expression. He seemed distressed, his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth set in a frown. He looked as if he was expecting me to storm out of here and leave him behind. I could practically feel the itch of guilt coming from him.

"Josh, seriously, I doubt he holds a grudge against you," I tried to assure him.

Before Josh could say anything else, Trevor and his family walked by us, Trevor sending me a quick wave and a strained smile at Josh.

"See," I said to Josh once Trevor was gone.

Josh rolled his eyes. "He looked like he was in pain."

I scoffed. "No he didn't."

He kinda did.

Josh sent me a knowing look that told me he was done talking about the situation. We spent the rest of our dinner with casual conversation.

***

I tried not to let myself do it, but my curiosity got the best of me.

As I lay in bed, I pulled my phone off of the nightstand and switched it back on. I hadn't looked at it all day, but now that I was alone, I couldn't do anything but think about what other messages could possibly be flooding my phone.

When it powered on, I couldn't keep myself from going directly to Instagram where my account held a copious amount of hateful messages.

Does your new team know you're a fag?

Surprised you haven't killed yourself yet. I would if I were you.

Should've gone to one of those camps they'd shock the fag out of you.

Better hope we don't catch you alone at the tournament.

I spent a good part of my night reading through the messages. My eyes burned with tears and I bit my bottom lip to try to keep myself from letting them fall.

When I finally dragged myself out of the app, I realized I had a missed call and voicemail from my mother.

"What the fuck," I muttered with a sniffle as I wiped my tearful eyes.

I pressed on voicemail and held the phone up to my ear.

" *Elijah. Please give me a call back. Dave has paid his fine and we have decided that we don't want to send you to any programs as long as you come to church every Wednesday and Sunday. Please call me back."*

I hit my head back against the headboard, throwing my phone down on the bed.

My head was spinning at the thought of all the messages I had received. I had thought I was in the clear and finally moving on from my old life. I thought I was finally letting myself feel included with my family and the team.

But now there was this. It was like my past would forever haunt me and keep me from fitting in with my new life. It was a dark shadow cast over me, always present and overbearing, following me wherever I went.

My chest was heavy and my eyes stung. All I wanted was to be free from this.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading!

What did you think about Elijah getting help from Mindy? And what about Josh and Elijah hanging out? And what Josh told Elijah about Trevor? Also, I think we all knew the drama with Elijah's mother wasn't over. What do you think about her calling him?

Let me know!

28

Since Dad had to work late the next Thursday evening, he enlisted Josh and me to do the grocery shopping after hockey practice. We were both tired and Josh was trying to get through the aisle as quickly as possibly while I slowly dragged my feet behind him.

"Where the hell is the lemon juice?" Josh said in frustration as he scanned through the items on the shelves.

"Maybe if you slowed down a little, you'd be able to find it," I muttered, Josh turning around to glare at me.

"Maybe if you were actually helping me, we'd be getting out of here quicker," he said in a sharp tone.

I sighed and plucked the lemon juice off the shelf he had just passed, tossing it into the carriage.

"Oops," Josh said with an innocent looking smile. "Why are you so down today?"

I knew he had noticed my sour mood by the looks he had given me all day whenever he saw me. He was able to refrain from saying anything while we were at school, but it was obvious his curiosity got the better of him.

"My mom called me yesterday," I admitted, causing Josh's eyes to widen.

"You need to tell Dan," he replied.

"I know."

He didn't respond, though I could tell he had more to say.

"What's that on your neck?" Josh asked after a few moments of silence between us, poking the bruise I had tried to cover.

"Nothing," I immediately replied, shoving his hands away.

Josh's eyes widened again. "Who have you been kissing?"

I rolled my eyes. "No one."

"You're a liar," he said. "But I already knew that."

I just scoffed and ignored his words.

Josh squinted in confusion at the list Dad had given us and then looked over at me.

"Do they even sell tampons at the grocery store?" he asked, scratching his head.

"Yes you idiot," I replied, walking ahead of him to direct him.

"Well I don't know," he defended. "I don't usually grocery shop."

That much was obvious.

Admittedly, when we got to the aisle even I was overwhelmed. There were so many different kinds and sizes. I had thought I'd just be able to pick up a box and that would be it, but it turned out to be much more complicated.

"What kind do they like?" I asked Josh, staring at the shelves filled with every type of tampon known to man.

"How should I know?" he replied.

"Well does it say it on the list?" I questioned in an annoyed tone.

"No."

The two of us stared at the shelves for at least five minutes before I just picked out a box that said regular.

"Do you think these are good enough?" I wondered.

"Probably?"

"If Ava is pissed about it then I'm telling her you picked them," I said as I threw the box into the carriage.

"Whatever."

After we finished getting everything on the list, we quickly checked out and headed home. We were the only two there when we got there so we put all the groceries away before Josh told me he was going out with Emma.

When he left, I headed up to my room to sit on my phone.

I wish I had the will power to stop myself from checking my messages, but it seemed like it was all I could do when I was alone. All I could do was just read the hateful things being sent to me. It was masochistic, but I couldn't control it.

It was the same old stuff they had been sending the last few days, calling me slurs and trying to scare me out of going to the hockey tournament in two weeks. Even if I wanted to, I could never back out of it. My team wouldn't let me. Fox wouldn't let me.

I was distracted from my thoughts when I hear my father raising his voice downstairs. He must have just gotten home.

Even his stern voice managed to sound gentle. I went downstairs to see what the commotion was about.

"I'm not happy with you, Ava," he said as my younger sat on the couch as he stood in front of her.

"I know, *Dad,* " she replied in a similar tone to his.

"You are in no position to be giving me attitude right now."

"What's going on?" I asked in a curious tone, causing my father to look over at me.

Ava sighed and turned around to face me. "I got in trouble at school and now I'm going to get in trouble at home too."

"You didn't just get in trouble," Dad interjected. "You *hit* somebody. That's unacceptable."

"He was being an ass!" Ava defended.

Dad sighed and shook his head at her as if he didn't know what to say.

"I told you don't talk like that," I reminded her, moving to sit beside her on the couch.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "I'm not in the mood to be lectured by you."

She was never in the mood, but I wasn't about to add fuel to the fire. Ava was very easy to piss off and she already looked beyond pissed.

"Did you hit him to defend yourself?" Dad asked with a thoughtful expression.

"Yes and no."

"What does that even mean?"

"He made me mad because I was talking with my friends about how I wanted to get back into hockey and try out next season for the school," Ava started to explain.

She had played hockey when she was younger but decided to quit because she didn't like getting up for the early morning practices.

"And he butted into our conversation and said that I couldn't try out because we don't have a girls team," she continued.

"Of course you can try out," Dad said. "Some boy can't tell you that you can't."

"I know that," she replied. "But then I started arguing with him and he started saying girls are too weak to play with guys and Dad, I *swear* , I was keeping my cool but then he started talking about Elijah."

The air left my lungs at her words. Dad stared down at her with a shocked expression, willing Ava to continue.

"Apparently his cousin plays on Elijah's old team and he knows that he's my brother so he started saying some really awful things about him," Ava said with an angry expression. "I told him to shut up and he wouldn't so I punched him."

Neither Dad or I had any idea what to say. I didn't want my little sister to have to go around punching people for me and I didn't want her to have to listen to people say vile things about me either, especially if it made her that upset.

Instead of saying anything, I got up from the couch and went back upstairs to my room. I heard Dad say something to Ava before his footsteps followed behind me.

"Elijah," Dad called out just as I entered my bedroom. I nodded at him, letting him know he could come in.

The two of us sat side by side on my bed while I stared at the wall and he stared at me.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a gentle tone.

"No," I replied. He seemed taken aback by my honesty, but he didn't let that show for long. "I don't want Ava getting in trouble because of me."

"She's not getting in trouble because of you," Dad assured me. "You didn't make her hit someone. That was a choice she made."

"But it was because of me," I said, looking toward him.

"It was because of that nasty, sexist, homophobic boy, not you," he replied.

"I just don't want her to have to hear that stuff," I admitted with a sigh. "It's one thing for me to hear it, but Ava shouldn't have to deal with that."

"Neither should you," Dad told me, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Elijah, the things people have to say about you should not influence the way you think about yourself."

I nodded, looking down at my lap.

"I know you feel badly about yourself because of what others have to say and I'm partially to blame," he continued.

I scoffed. "No, you're not."

"I am," he insisted. "If I had spent more time with you when you lived with your mom, I'd like to think I would have known about your sexuality before her and I would have been able to get you out of that situation sooner."

"It's not your fault. She kept me from you," I told him.

She truly wanted to keep me from my father as much as possible and I let her because he had his perfect family with Mindy, Josh, and Ava. Throwing me into the mix would've just made all their lives harder.

"I could've fought harder," Dad argued. "But I didn't because I thought you were happy with the way things were. I wish I would've known better and I'm sorry that I didn't."

I didn't say anything.

"Elijah," Dad said, catching my attention again. "When people say these awful things to you or about you, that is a reflection of the person *they* are, not who you are."

His words got me thinking of the countless messages I had been receiving over the last few days. I didn't actually believe the horrible things they were saying to me, but they were effective in making me feel like shit.

"I need to tell you something," I said.

"What is it?"

"Mom called me the other day," I confessed.

Dad looked disgruntled by my words, letting out a sigh.

"What did she say?"

"I didn't answer. She left a voicemail," I told him. "She basically said she wanted me to go back with her and go to church twice a week instead of some camp."

Dad nodded. "Thank you for telling me."

I knew I had to tell him because he had made it clear he wanted me to if she were to ever contact me. I owed that much to him. I probably should have told him about the countless other messages too, but there really wasn't anything he could do about those that wouldn't completely embarrass me.

"Maybe we should change your phone number," he suggested.

I shrugged. "I don't even know how she found this one. She would probably just find it again."

Dad let out another sigh. "I'm going to talk to her. She shouldn't be contacting you."

I just nodded, not knowing what to say. Dad let the frustrated look fall from his face, looking toward me with a smile and tossing his arm around my shoulder.

"I love you, Elijah," he said, squeezing me to his side.

I couldn't help but smile. "I love you too."

"Now, I have to go finish dealing with your sister," Dad said, standing up from the bed.

"Good luck with that."

He let out a laugh before leaving my room and shutting the door behind him.

Once I was alone again, the masochist in me went straight back to my messages. In that moment, my father's words were forgotten and I was taken by the words of my tormentors again.

***

"Elijah... Elijah!"

My eyes sprung open and it took me a second to realize I was sitting in my English class, Nadia waving her hand in front of me.

"Shit," I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asked me, giving me a look of concern. To say the least, I was surprised she even cared.

"I didn't get a lot of sleep last night," I admitted with a yawn. I was too busy being kept up by the dark thoughts swimming around in my head.

"I can tell," Nadia replied with a strange look. "Are you doing anything this weekend?"

"Just some team building thing Coach wants us to do before we do the tournament," I responded. "Why?"

"Because you haven't hung out with us in a while and I might miss you," she said, though her expression was hard and didn't match her words.

"Do you?"

"I might."

"Where's Lexa?" I asked, noticing she wasn't in the room.

"She's sick. She's got some gross cough," Nadia replied with a disgusted look. "I'm going to go over and take care of her later, but if she makes me

sick..."

I laughed. "If she makes you sick then she can take care of you."

Nadia chuckled. "I guess."

At the end of class, Fox brushed by me, sending a smirk my way as he left the classroom. I couldn't help but smile back as I felt heat rise to my face due to his touch.

By the time lunch rolled around, Trevor was the only one at the table when I arrived.

"Hey," he cheerfully greeted me.

"Hey," I replied, sitting down across from him. "Can I talk to you about something?"

Seeing him reminded me of what Josh had said the other night when we saw Trevor at the restaurant. I wanted to talk to him about it while we were still the only two at the table.

"Of course," Trevor instantly responded.

"So Josh told me about what happened with you two freshman year and he seems pretty guilty about it," I told him.

Trevor's eyes went wider than I had ever seen him. The shocked and nervous look on his face looked so strange coming from him.

"He told you?" Trevor asked in a hushed tone.

"Yeah. I think he feels pretty bad so if I convince him to apologize do you think you'd be able to forgive him?"

I knew it was a big ask, but I didn't want to convince Josh to apologize if Trevor wasn't okay with it and it would only make matters worse.

"I already forgive him," he said. "I understand why he wanted to distance himself."

"He's really a good guy," I said. I never thought I'd be defending Josh like this.

"I just can't believe he told you we kissed," Trevor said, shaking his head.

" *What* ?" I shrieked, gaining the attention of some people around us.

Trevor and I must've looked crazy staring at each other with matching expressions of shock and fright, our eyes wide and mouths hung open.

"I thought you said he told you!" Trevor whispered in a forceful tone, leaning closer to my face.

"He told me that you liked him and that he said some mean stuff to you and made you leave him alone!"

"He did," Trevor said, leaning back now that people had stopped paying attention to us. "After we kissed."

I didn't know what to do with this information. It wasn't like Josh owed me the whole truth about the situation, but I couldn't help but feel strange about why he omitted it.

"He's not gay, if that's what you're thinking," Trevor chimed in to interrupt my thoughts. "At least I don't think he is."

"Then why did it happen?"

"We were young. He was confused. It happened one time and then he has avoided me ever since," Trevor explained.

I stayed quiet, not knowing what to say.

"Please don't confront him about it," Trevor begged with a pleading look. "He obviously didn't want you to know about it."

I couldn't say anything else on the matter because we were then joined by Johnny, Austin, and Nadia.

"Elijah your brother is looking dashing today please make sure he knows it," Austin said as he sat down beside me.

Nadia rolled her eyes. "You think he looks good every day."

"That's because he does."

After the conversation I just had with Trevor, I was done talking about my brother.

**

Hi everyone. Thank you for being patient and understanding about the late update while I finished up some schoolwork!

What did you think about Josh and Elijah's trip to the store? And what happened with Ava and Elijah's talk with his dad? What about what Trevor told Elijah about him and Josh?

Thanks again!

29

I was passing the puck around with Ian when Ryan came over to us and intercepted it.

"Fuck off," Ian called out.

"Bruins game. My place. Tonight," Ryan said, hitting the puck toward him. "Be there."

"Okay," Ian said with a scoff. "You could've just said that instead of being annoying."

Ryan and I shared amused looks before he skated away, shaking his head.

Ian was especially grumpy today, clearly not in the mood for any interactions other than what we were doing right now. I didn't mind though because I was hellbent on avoiding Josh since Trevor had told me the truth about them. If Ian being grumpy kept most of the guys away from us, it worked for me.

Since getting to know Ian, I knew he wasn't much of a talker. And although I had seen him act more light-hearted when it was just me, him, and Fox, he didn't open up any more when it was just the two of us.

"Are you gonna go tonight?" I asked as we continued passing the puck, waiting for practice to officially start.

Ian shrugged. "I have something else to do."

I wasn't going to push him further, not that he would tell me anything more if I had.

After practice, Fox stomped down the hallway in front of me, causing me to have to speed up to catch up with him.

"Why are you being so moody?" I asked Fox, raising my eyebrow in question as we walked down the hall together Friday afternoon.

Practice was short tonight because we were doing a practice and team building activity tomorrow morning. Coach said he didn't want to overwork us and I wasn't going to complain about having the afternoon to spend with Fox before we went over to Ryan's for the game.

"I'm not," he said with a pout.

I gave him a knowing look as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Fine," he gave in. "Wren and Robin are coming home this weekend for their winter break."

"What's so bad about that?"

"Nothing's bad about Robin coming home, it's Wren," he answered in an annoyed tone.

It wasn't the first time he had shown me his distaste toward Wren and I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious as to why they didn't get along.

"Why do you have a problem with Wren?" I asked.

"He's just an ass. He's hated me since I was born. Literally," Fox complained. "He's a know it all punk that always got me in trouble and had to be better than me at everything."

"You guys have never gotten along?"

"Never," Fox confirmed. "He's a narcissist and thinks he's *so smart* because he goes to Brown."

Fox kept a frustrated look on his face as the two of us made our way out to his car.

I didn't know what to say to him. All I knew was I definitely wasn't the right person to be giving anyone advice on sibling drama. Fox was more

experienced that I was when it came to siblings anyway; he had five of them.

"He's probably already home," Fox groaned when we got in the car and he looked at the clock.

"Well, at least we'll be going to Ryan's tonight," I said, trying to make him feel better.

Fox just hummed in agreement as he began driving to his house. When we arrived there, Fox let out a loud sigh, seeing a new car parked in the driveway.

"Wren?" I asked as the two of us got out of the car.

"Unfortunately."

As soon as we got inside, we were greeted by the whole family in the living room, including a guy I had never seen and could only assume was Robin.

"Fox! Elijah! Come look who's home!" Vanessa, Fox's mother, excitedly exclaimed, motioning for us to come further into the house.

"Yeah, yeah. I see them," Fox grumbled, earning a stern look from his mother.

"You can at least act a little excited to see me," Robin said to his brother with a grin. "And you could introduce me to your friend."

"That's Elijah," Raven said as she stood next to Robin. "He's on the team with Fox."

"Nice to meet you," Robin kindly greeted me.

"You too," I replied with a smile.

I looked down at the couch and noticed Wren sat between Colt and Fawn, showing them something on his phone. He hadn't even looked up to greet his brother, not that Fox would have wanted him to.

"Elijah, would you like to stay for dinner tonight?" Leo asked from beside his wife.

"We're going to Ryan's for the B's," Fox answered for me.

"Thanks for offering," I said, elbowing Fox in the side.

"You're not going to stay to welcome your brothers home?" Vanessa asked with her eyebrows raised.

"They're home, I welcome them," Fox said in a bored tone, starting toward the stairs.

"Mom, it's fine," Robin said. "We'll see him tomorrow."

"Actually, you won't," Fox said, stopping at the bottom of the stairs and turning to face his family. "I have hockey tomorrow. You'll see me Sunday. Maybe."

Wren scoffed, looking up from his phone for the first time since we had arrived. Fox clenched his jaw and I could tell he was holding back from saying something.

"I'm sure you'll think of a reason to be out of the house Sunday too," Wren said, a sarcastic smile on his face. "Hockey's more important after all."

"Leave him alone, Wren," Leo warned his son.

"Let's go upstairs," I whispered, lightly pushing Fox.

Fox stomped up the stairs while I followed closely behind him and the two of us went down the hall into his room. He threw his hockey bag down in the corner, pulling on his hair as I tightly shut the door behind us. Then he threw himself down onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling.

"You good?" I asked him.

Fox turned his head to face me. "Come here."

I made my way over to the bed for Fox to pull me down on top of him so that I was straddling his waist.

"Do you see why I hate him?" he asked, resting his hands on my thighs.

I hummed in agreement, smiling down at him. "Do you need me to distract you?"

A smirk instantly overtook his face. "Yes please."

That was all he had to say for my lips to grab his in a kiss. We made out for quite a while, Fox's tongue finding its way into my mouth. My hands were on his chest while his grabbed my hips and backside.

"Elijah," Fox said, his lips brushing over mine as he said my name.

"Hm?" I hummed as I kept kissing him.

"Be with me," he said, pulling away.

I sat up on his lap, my eyes wide.

"What?"

"Be with me," he said again, stating straight into my eyes.

I let out a sigh, staring up at the ceiling.

"Fox, I–" I sighed again.

I couldn't do this. Words couldn't describe how much I wanted to be able to just *be* with Fox, but it wasn't that simple. I wasn't ready and neither was he.

"I can't," I said looking back at him. "I can't do the whole secret relationship thing."

It was different than what we were doing now, just being friends with some benefits. This wasn't a commitment and it didn't cause me to have to sneak

around. Nobody had to know about this, but an actual relationship was much different. That would be something I wasn't willing to hide.

"And I can't come out," Fox said with a sullen sigh.

"I don't want you to come out for me," I told him. "If you do it I want it to be for you."

"I can't do that," Fox said, sitting up and causing me to get off his lap to sit beside him.

"I mean, you technically could," I told him and he looked at me like I was crazy. "What? Your family would be cool with it. So would the guys."

Fox scoffed, shaking his head. "The guys wouldn't take me seriously anymore."

I squinted at him and put some distance between us.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You don't seriously think the team would take me seriously if they found out, do you?" he asked in an almost snarky tone. "Or colleges?"

I stood up from the bed and crossed my arms over my chest.

"So you think none of them take me seriously? *You* don't take me seriously?"

Fox rolled his eyes. "That's not what I'm saying."

"That's exactly what you're saying."

My voice was sharp as anger and irritation flooded my body.

"No–"

"You think that gay people in sports aren't taken seriously," I said, my voice rising.

"No, I'm saying that *I* wouldn't be taken seriously," he argued, standing up from the bed. "I'm supposed to lead the team. They have to respect me."

"You think they wouldn't respect you because you're gay?"

"I'm just being honest, Elijah," he said with a hard expression. "You of all people should know how they can be."

"Yeah and it fucking sucks because apparently I'm not respected or taken seriously," I spat, moving toward the door.

"That's not what I'm saying!"

He beat me to the door, standing in front of it so I couldn't get out.

"It's just–" he sighed, running his hand through his hair. "It's harder to get taken seriously when you're out. There is so much more against you."

"You don't think I know that?" I snapped. "But *our team* already respects you and this wouldn't change that."

"I can't do it," Fox said, shaking his head.

"I'm not asking you to," I told him in a hard tone. "But did you think I'd be okay with being your dirty little secret?"

"That's not–"

"I like you, Fox," I admitted with a sigh. "And this isn't an ultimatum, but I can't do this. It'd feel like going back in the closet."

He looked at me with a shocked expression.

"You're telling me you *want* everyone to know about us?"

I glared at him. "I'm saying I won't be a secret for you."

"Fine," Fox snapped. "Then I guess we're done with this." He motioned between the two of us.

By the look on his face I could tell he was turning back into the cold version of him, the one that hated me at the beginning of the year.

I didn't answer him as I pulled the door open, hitting him with it. I stormed out of the room and was a little discouraged when I realized he wasn't following me.

"Going so soon?" Wren's voice asked from behind me as I made it to the front door.

I turned to face him, noticing we were the only two in the hallway.

"Something came up," I said in a low tone.

Wren only smiled and didn't say anything as I turned around and left the house, calling Josh as I did so.

"Yeah?" Josh answered the phone.

"I need you to pick me up," I told him as I stomped down the sidewalk.

"I thought you were at Fox's," he said.

"I was and now I'm not," I said in an agitated tone. "Please come get me."

"Fox can't drive you?"

"Josh," I said with a sigh.

"Alright, alright," he answered before hanging up.

My fight with Fox was the only thing I could focus on as I walked down the sidewalk. I wanted to be with him, I knew that much, but I couldn't hide for him. Not when I was finally getting more comfortable in my own skin.

It didn't take long for Josh to meet up with me with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Why were you walking?" he asked once I was in the car.

All I had to do was give him a look for him to know I didn't want to talk about it. We were silent the whole way home and I could tell Josh was irritated with me.

"Did something happen with Fox?" Josh asked as soon as we got in the house.

"I'm not talking about it," I answered, moving toward the stairs.

"I warned you," Josh called out, causing me to stop and look at him. "I told you not to get yourself hurt with him."

"Shut up, Josh," I spat as he came closer to me. "I never asked you to warn me or look out for me so just shut up."

"No but I have to look out for you," he argued. "You think Dan would be okay with it if I just let shit happen to you?"

I just scoffed and didn't say anything. My anger had distracted me from what I had found out about Josh from Trevor earlier, but now that I was face to face with him it was all I could think about.

"You can act like you're my savior or whatever but you lied to me the other day," I angrily told him.

"What the hell did I lie to you about?" Josh asked in an almost mocking tone.

"Trevor," I said. "He told me what happened with you two because I wanted to see if he'd let you apologize and he thought you told me the whole truth."

A look of realization washed over Josh's face.

"I know you two kis–"

"Shut up!" Josh sharply cut me off, a look of anger on his face. "You should've never done that! You don't need to be butting into my life!"

I scoffed. "You mean like how you're always butting into mine?"

"That's not the same," Josh replied in a low tone, shaking his head with dark eyes.

"You're right because I didn't mean to do it, but you just breathe down my neck for fun," I spat, crossing my arms.

"You think I want to do that? I have to!" Josh shouted. "If I didn't look out for you, you wouldn't survive here."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means the team would have never been okay with you being here. I've had to put you over the rest of the team to make sure no one messed with you."

My jaw was tensely set as Josh appeared to get more and more irritated by the second. Words couldn't find their way out of my mouth as I thought about what he said. My anger dwindled and I was now facing a different emotion.

"And all you've done is complain about it ever since you got here!" Josh continued. "I had to start sharing my life with you all of a sudden! Don't you think it's been hard for me too?"

"I never said–" I started, my voice quiet and shaky.

"You came here and everything changed," Josh cut me off.

A burning sensation started in my eyes as my throat dried up. I knew I had ruined this family the second I moved in. It was one thing to inherently know it, but it was another to hear it out loud.

"Not only that but it's like you don't even want to be here," Josh continued. "Maybe you should've just stayed with your mother until college."

Tears welled in my eyes at the gut wrenching pain of feeling so pathetic.

"And stay in the closet?" I choked out.

"You don't even want to be here," he reminded me.

"It's not like I can go anywhere else, Josh," I said, my voice cracking. "But don't worry, you only have to deal with me until the end of the school year and then I'll be gone."

Josh didn't say anything as I turned around and ran up the stairs to my room.

The day had started so normal but in the matter of an hour I was back to having no one but myself.

**

Hello everyone thank you for reading.

What did you think about meeting Robin and the interactions with Wren? How do you feel about Wren? What about what happened with Fox and Elijah? Do you understand each of their point of views? And Elijah's fight with Josh?

Let me know!

Also I just started drafting a new story using a new outline method so we'll see how that goes not sure if it will work for me yet.

30

Third Person

Josh sat on the couch with his head in his hands as he relived the argument that had just occurred with Elijah. He knew he shouldn't have said those things to him, but his emotions had gotten the better of him.

He didn't know what he could say to make it better, but he knew that he had to say something. Elijah was already insecure about his life here, and Josh had only made it worse with what he said.

The guilt consumed him within an hour after the argument, causing him to stand up from the couch and make his way to Elijah's room. He lightly tapped on the door with his knuckle and waited a few moments, but there was no answer.

"Elijah," Josh said, tapping the door again. "Hey, I'm sorry. Can we just talk?"

Again, there was no answer.

Despite his better judgement, Josh waited a few more moments before opening the door and letting himself inside. What he found was an empty room with an open window. He made his way over to the window and looked out. Elijah was nowhere in sight.

Josh sighed, shutting the window and turning around to leave the room. He was about to shut the door when he noticed Elijah's phone sitting on top of the dresser.

He shook his head with a tense jaw, thinking how irresponsible it was for him to leave without his phone. Josh then pulled out his own phone and decided to call Fox.

"Hey," Fox answered. "If you're going to ask about going to Ryan's tonight, I'm probably just going to stay home. I'm not in the mood."

"I was gonna ask if Elijah went back to your house," Josh told him.

"He left a while ago. I assumed you picked him up," Fox said.

"I did and then we got in a fight and he left without taking his phone," Josh said with a sigh.

He could admit to himself that he just assumed Elijah would go back to Fox. He didn't know his brother well enough to know anywhere else he would go.

"He's not here," Fox said. "If he comes around I'll let you know."

"Alright."

After hanging up the phone, he went back downstairs.

Josh didn't begin to worry until it got dark out and started to rain. The last thing he wanted was for Elijah to be walking around at night in the rain. Who knew what could happen.

It was only because of Josh's worry that he went back into Elijah's room and grabbed his phone and put in the passcode he had seen Elijah use. Josh didn't want to have to do what he did next, but his paranoia was eating him alive.

"Hello, Elijah," Trevor answered the phone in a bright tone after two rings.

Josh cleared his throat and awkwardly replied, "It's uh... it's Josh."

"Oh!" Trevor said, sounding surprised. "Hi."

"I'm assuming Elijah's not with you?" Josh asked, trying to move past the discomfort he felt.

"He's not. Is everything okay?" Trevor asked in a sincere tone.

"He just went out without taking his phone. I thought maybe he'd be with you," Josh explained. "Give me a call if he shows up?"

"Of course," Trevor instantly replied.

The two of them stayed on the line for a few awkward moments before Josh choked out a strangled "thanks" and hung up the phone.

His own phone was lighting up with texts from Ryan asking where he, Fox, and Elijah were, making it clear that Elijah had not gone to Ryan's place for the game.

Josh groaned and took Elijah's phone with him back downstairs to the living room, making sure the volume was turned up on both phones. He turned the hockey game on a low volume, trying to calm his nerves. He tried to tell himself he was just being paranoid. Elijah was old enough to go off by himself without a chaperone. He was fine. He could take care of himself. But still, Josh worried.

This was exactly what Elijah hated about him. Because Josh felt the need to watch out for him, protect him, when he was capable of doing it himself. He wasn't a fragile little kid. But Josh treated him like he needed to be watched. It was enough to anger anyone.

More time passed and eventually Dan, Mindy, and Ava arrived at home. Josh tried to muster up an excuse as to why Elijah was gone without his phone on him, but he couldn't think of anything but the truth. He didn't want to lie to Dan and his mom anyway. Especially not to Dan when it came to Elijah.

"I thought you were going to Ryan's," Mindy said in a confused tone as she and Dan made their way into the living room. Ava headed straight for the kitchen.

"I was but uh," Josh stuttered, looking at Mindy and Dan's waiting looks. "Elijah and I got in a fight and now he's gone."

"He's gone? What do you mean he's gone?" Dan asked in a rushed tone.

"He left through his window and left his phone here," Josh sheepishly explained. He was worried for Dan's reaction.

Dan felt a feeling of dread creep up on him. "He's not at Ryan's? Or with Fox?"

All Josh could do was shake his head, not knowing how to tell Dan he had driven his son out of the house in tears.

"I'm going to call Susan and see if he's with her," Dan said, pulling his phone out and leaving the room.

"Dad? What's going on?" Ava asked as he passed by her. She gave Josh and Mindy a strange look before turning and following her father.

Mindy and Josh just watched them as they left.

"I feel so bad," Josh admitted to his mother.

"He'll come back," Mindy assured him, moving to sit beside him on the couch.

"I know he will," Josh said. "But I made him feel like he had to leave."

"What did you fight about?"

Josh didn't want to get into the personal details of what had triggered his response to Elijah, but he told his mother about the rest of their argument.

"You have to be patient with people's emotions, Joshua," Mindy started. "He doesn't feel like he has a home. He feels like he doesn't belong here and he is allowed to feel like that."

"I know," Josh agreed.

"Even if you might think he's being ungrateful, you have to realize he has emotional trauma," Mindy explained. "He needs us to be a strong support system because he hasn't had that."

"I know, Mom. I feel really bad."

Mindy comfortingly rubbed his back. Dan came back into the living room with a distressed expression, pulling his hand through his hair. Ava followed closely behind him.

"He's not with Susan," he told them. "I really hope she doesn't go looking for him."

"Dan, I'm sorry," Josh said in a low tone.

"It's not your fault," Dan dismissed him, but didn't glance over at him. Instead, he looked out the window as if waiting for Elijah to appear. "You don't think he's walking around in the rain do you?"

"I'm sure he's fine," Mindy assured him. "Probably went somewhere to be alone."

"It's pretty dark out there," Dan said as if he hadn't heard his wife, moving toward the window. "I'm going to take a drive and make sure he's not walking."

"I'm going with you," Ava said, zipping up her jacket.

Dan didn't wait for a response before leaving the house with Ava and getting in his car to drive around the town.

Josh sighed, putting his head in his hands. "I feel *so* bad."

"He'll come home, Josh," Mindy tried assuring her son.

"Should I go help Dan look for him?" Josh asked, looking up at Mindy.

"We should wait here to see if he comes home," she told him.

They waited together on the couch for what seemed like ages before an unfamiliar vehicle pulled up to the house. Mindy stood from the couch when a man and a woman got out of the car and made their way onto the

porch to knock on the door. Josh followed behind his mother out of confusion and curiosity.

"Susan, Dave," Mindy greeted them as she opened the door, making no move to let them inside.

"Where is Dan?" Susan asked. "Apparently he lost our son!"

Josh walked closer to his mother, not feeling comfortable with the angry looks being directed at her by Susan and Dave.

"He's out getting him," Mindy vaguely replied. "There was just a little misunderstanding and we thought maybe he could've gone to you."

"And you know where he is?"

"He's getting him," Mindy said, obviously not wanting to give the two of them too much information.

"So you don't know where he is," Dave interjected in a hard tone. "This is very irresponsible of you both."

Mindy didn't let her stance waver. Josh knew his mother was tough as nails. There was no way these two would be able to get under her skin.

"I'm sure child services would love to hear about this," Susan said in a threatening tone, Dave nodding in agreement.

"Elijah is eighteen," Mindy reminded her with raised eyebrows.

"I know how old my son is," Susan snapped. "You do not get to act like his mother. *I'm* his mother!"

"She's a better mother to him than you ever were," Josh said, stepping next to Mindy and crossing his arms over his chest.

"You don't talk to adults like that," Dave said in a low tone, pointing toward Josh.

"Don't scold my son," Mindy said in an even tone.

"He needs to learn respect," Dave told her.

"I think he's fine," Mindy replied.

"Of course you do," Susan hissed. "Thats why I never wanted my son getting too close to yours."

Mindy looked as if she was going to start flipping out. Her jaw was tightly set and her eyes were narrowed. She could take them saying bad things about her, but when they started talking about her children, it was a different story.

"You both need to leave," Mindy slowly said. "Dan will call you when Elijah is home."

"He should bring him to me since you two can't take care of him," Susan hissed.

Mindy shook her head. "Absolutely not."

"He's my son! I never lost–"

"He's *my* son," Mindy cut her off in an angry tone. "A mother doesn't throw her child out. He is mine and Dan's son. He is Josh and Ava's brother. He is part of *this* family."

Susan and Dave spread even angrier looks across their faces. Josh put himself in front of his mother as he glared at the two in the doorway.

"You need to leave," Josh ordered.

"We will stay here so we can take Elijah home when he gets back," Dave said in a menacing tone.

Josh's glare hardened. "He's not going with you."

"Hey asshole," Fox called out, causing everyone to look to where he stood on the walkway. Everyone was so preoccupied with what was happening in the doorway, that none of them noticed Fox pull up to the house.

"There's another one with no manners," Dave said, rolling his eyes.

Fox walked up onto the porch directly behind Dave and Susan, scowling at the back of Dave's head.

"What are you doing here?" Josh asked his friend.

"I was driving around looking for Elijah," Fox replied. "I just came by to see if he was home yet."

Dave turned to Fox and looked as if he was trying to intimidate him off the porch, but Fox wouldn't budge. His feet stayed planted in place, not willing to move.

"This is the boy I saw Elijah with," Dave told his wife. "Back before he came to see us."

Susan directed a glare at Fox, but he didn't stand down.

"Fox, why don't you come inside?" Mindy suggested, though it sounded more like a command.

Fox pushed past Dave and walked into the house, standing behind Mindy.

"We are waiting here for when Elijah comes back," Susan asserted.

"They told you to go, so go," Fox argued in a stern tone. "Elijah won't go back with you."

"Fox, Josh, go wait for me in the kitchen," Mindy instructed the two boys. She put her hand up before either of them could protest and motioned for them to leave.

Fox and Josh each shared a look before making their way further into the house and into the kitchen.

"Why the fuck are they here?" Fox asked as he leaned against the counter.

"Dan called Susan to see if Elijah was with her and they just showed up here," Josh explained with a sigh.

"Why did Elijah even run off? What did you two fight about?"

Josh didn't want to admit exactly what he had said to Elijah to upset him. Fox would most certainly judge him harshly for it and he was already feeling badly enough.

Luckily, Josh didn't have to answer him because Mindy came into the kitchen, grabbing both of their attention.

"Are they gone?" Josh asked his mother.

"They're off the porch," she answered.

"But are they *gone* ?"

"They're in their car," Mindy admitted. "Outside the house."

"We should call the fuckin' cops or something," Fox suggested with a scowl. "To get them out of here."

"Hopefully Dan brings Elijah home and they'll see that he's safe and leave," Mindy said, though her tone didn't sound hopeful.

"They don't care about his safety, they just want control over him," Fox responded in a low tone. "Just a few weeks ago that asshole punched him in the face."

"That's what happened?" Josh asked, his voice filled with shock.

Mindy and Dan alluded to the fact that Elijah had gotten that bruise when he went to his mother's house weeks ago, but they had never said Dave had hit him.

"I called Dan, he will deal with it when he gets home," Mindy assured them.

"Has he found him?" Josh asked.

Mindy shook her head. "No, but hopefully that just means he is somewhere inside and not walking around at night in the rain."

The three of them were silent for a few moments before Mindy spoke again.

"Is there anyone you can call to see if he's with them?" she asked, looking toward Josh and Fox.

"He's not at Ryan's and he's not with Trevor," Josh said, shaking his head. "The only other person I can think of that he'd go to is Fox."

Fox scoffed. "He wouldn't go to Trevor."

"What about any of the other guys on the team? Or any of the GSA kids?" Mindy asked with a thoughtful expression.

"Claudia maybe?" Josh suggested.

Fox rolled his eyes. "He wouldn't go to Claudia."

"Well then who would he go to if you know him so well?" Josh questioned in an irritated tone.

"Me," Fox sharply answered. "If we hadn't gotten into a fight earlier, he would've come to me."

Josh couldn't even argue with him because he knew it was true.

The three of them moved to the living room and looked out the window where Susan and Dave sat in their car outside the house. It was a few hours later when Dan and Ava arrived home, without Elijah, and Susan immediately jumped out of the car to chase after him.

Mindy stood from the couch and went to the door to meet her husband and daughter. Ava stomped into the house with a scowl on her face, taking off her jacket and shoving it into the hall closet before slamming it shut.

"Ava," Josh said in a low tone. "What's the matter?"

"Seriously?" she nearly screeched, throwing her arms up. "Elijah is missing and his mom is here trying to steal him away from us and you're asking me what's the matter?"

"She's not going to steal him," Josh assured her, shaking his head.

Ava let out a loud groan and pushed past Josh, stomping up the stairs to her room.

A few moments later, Dan and Mindy arrived in the living room.

"Are they gone for real now?" Fox asked to which Dan nodded.

"You boys should go get some rest," Dan said. "I'll wait up for Elijah."

"Dan–" Josh started.

"It's late," he cut him off. Josh could tell how stressed he was and he didn't want to make it any worse on him.

"Fox, let us know if he goes to your house," Mindy said.

Fox nodded and moved toward the door, not saying anything.

Once Fox was gone, Josh let out a sigh and made his way up to his bedroom where the guilt he felt kept him up all night.

**

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading!

Where do you think Elijah went? How do you feel about Josh in this chapter? What about the interaction between Mindy, Susan, and Dave?

And Fox coming to check up on Elijah?

Let me know!

Also, I hope everyone is staying safe and healthy with the corona virus going around. My school closed for the next three weeks so I'm going to have to do classes online but I've been having to go to work.

Stay safe!

31

Pain in its physical form was manageable. It would go away with time and until then, you could just pop a pain reliever. Emotional pain was much more complex. There was no real cure. You either got over it or you didn't. The emotional pain I felt wasn't just from the events earlier in the day but from months of bottled up emotions that have finally come to the surface to suffocate me. I didn't feel like I was breathing but I knew that I was.

A dull throb ached in my ankle as I limped down the sidewalk away from my house. I obviously wasn't very experienced in sneaking out my window, stumbling on the way out and rolling my ankle in the process.

Tears furiously fell down my cheeks, my hand roughly swiping them away as I stormed down the sidewalk. It was like all of the feelings I kept inside were pouring out and there was no way I could stop it.

My chest heaved and my ankle throbbed while my feet carried me wherever they wanted without the permission of my mind. The only thing on my mind was the feeling of true loneliness.

I didn't know how long I had been walking, but it must have been a while because eventually my hair and clothes were damp with rain and my feet took me to the last place I wanted to be.

The church.

I stood in front of it for a few moments, flashbacks of when I used to come here with my friends rushing through my head. I looked at the stone steps in front of the door and remembered when one of my old teammates, Landon, was messing around with Micah and ended up sending him tumbling down the steps. Micah scratched up his leg pretty badly, but we all laughed it off.

I looked past the church and toward the empty parking lot and remembered sitting there in Micah's car and telling him that I was gay. I remember the

stoic look on his face and the way he said nothing as he put the car in drive and drove me home.

The memories haunted me.

My feet had a mind of their own as they dragged me up the stone steps and past the heavy wooden doors into the church. No one had come by to lock the doors yet. They used to leave at least one door unlocked all the time for anyone who wanted to pray but someone had come in and vandalized the church, so members had arranged for people to come lock all the doors every night.

It had felt like ages since I had stepped foot in here. The red carpet looked brighter than I remembered it but the wooden pews looked just as hard and uncomfortable as ever. I glanced up at the second level, remembering the Sundays I had sat up there with my friends while my mother and Dave sat below with the other parents.

I slowly walked down the aisle and stopped at the end. The altar still looked beautiful, decorated for Christmas. I slid into the front pew, taking a deep breath.

It was too overwhelming to be here. Memories from my past whirled around in my head, mixing with my emotions. I choked out a sob and the waterworks I hadn't even noticed had stopped, continued again. I slid further into the pew and positioned myself flat on my back, staring up at the high ceiling as tears poured out of the corner of my eyes.

I was pathetic. I wished I could just allow myself to open up and truly integrate into my new life, but it was *so hard.* And I was *so tired* . I was scared of getting too comfortable and caring too much. My fears and anxieties only burdened everyone around me.

Josh didn't deserve my shit. Dad didn't deserve my shit. Fox deserved to have someone who could be what he needed. All I did was complicate things for everyone.

"Elijah?" an astonished voice called out. I didn't have to look to know it was Micah. He was my best friend at one point, I would know his voice from anywhere.

"Elijah," he said again, standing over me and looking down at my tearful, blotchy face. "Are you okay?"

I couldn't help but start laughing, which only caused him to look more concerned. Tears continued to leak from my eyes in a constant stream while I laughed. Sobs ripped through my throat in between my laughter. I didn't know what this was, but it felt so unnatural.

"No," I said once my laughter stopped and my cries continued. "I'm not okay."

"What's wrong?" Micah asked in a gentle tone, sitting down beside me as I sat up and stared straight ahead.

"My life is fucked up and it's my fault," I answered in a raspy tone. "Not that it matters that much to you."

"Yes it does," he instantly replied.

I didn't respond.

"What are you doing here?" he asked after a few moments of silence.

"What are *you* doing here?" I still didn't look at him.

"Locking the church," he said. "It was my parents' night to do it but they're gone for the weekend."

"I don't actually care," I told him with an eye roll, swiping my hands across my cheeks to wipe my tears.

"We can't stay here," Micah said, ignoring my comment. "If you want we can—"

"I'm not going to your house," I abruptly cut him off.

"I was going to say we could go get something to eat," he countered. "You're obviously worked up and don't have anywhere else to go. If you did, you wouldn't be here."

I hated that he knew me and I despised that I actually agreed to go with him.

"So..." Micah trailed as he pulled out of the church parking lot, "You walked all the way here?"

I rested my head on the window, staring straight ahead. My eyes still stung from the tears I cried. I didn't want to even look at myself and see how swollen they would be.

"I don't have a car," I said in a bland tone. "The one I had got taken from me when I got kicked out of my house."

I saw Micah wince out of the corner of my eye.

"Your dad didn't get you one?" he wondered.

"I technically share with Josh."

"Oh, right. I forgot he's the same age as us."

We didn't speak for the rest of the ride and for that, I was grateful. Speaking to Micah felt so wrong . He may be able to act like nothing happened with us, but I couldn't.

I didn't pay attention to where we were going until Micah pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant. I had never been here, but I assumed it was somewhere he was familiar with.

I followed Micah into the restaurant and we were seated right away. There was barely anyone in there, but then again, it was quite late. The staff probably hated us for coming in this late.

As soon as we were sitting, I picked up my menu to avoid having to speak to Micah. I could feel his stare on me like it was burning into my skin, but I

paid him no mind.

"Hi, my name is Ian, I'll be your server," the waiter said when he walked up to the table. My eyes instantly shot up to meet Ian's, who looked completely miserable as he stared back down at me.

"Ian? What are you doing here?" I stupidly asked.

He rolled his eyes. "I work here, dipshit. What do you want to drink?"

Ian did not seem like the type that would make a good waiter, but I didn't say that to him.

"A beer," I answered.

"I'm not getting fired for you and I've seen you drunk, it's not a good look and I'm not dealing with you," Ian said, rolling his eyes again and shifting his stance as he looked increasingly annoyed.

"You got drunk?" Micah questioned with a confused tone. I had almost forgotten he was here. I wished I could forget that.

"Who the hell is this?" Ian asked me, motioning his hand toward Micah. "Wait, why aren't you at Ryan's?"

"Too many questions. Get me a water," I replied.

"You look like you've been crying," Ian pointed out, ignoring my order.

"Thanks for noticing," I sarcastically responded, glancing back down at my menu.

"Um," Micah said, clearing his throat. "I'll have a water too."

Ian didn't say anything as he walked away from the table to get our drinks.

"How do you know him?" Micah asked.

I sighed, turning the page on my menu. "He's on my hockey team."

Ian was back quicker than I expected. He placed the waters down in front of us and pulled out his notepad.

"What do you want to eat?" Ian asked in a hard tone, staring down at me.

"You're a bad waiter," I told him, glancing up from the menu. "You're so rude."

"Only because it's you," he answered with a sarcastic smile. "Also, who the hell is this?" he asked me again.

"I'm Micah, one of Elijah's old friends," Micah spoke up.

Ian just stared at him for a few moments before turning back to me.

"If he messes with you or anything..." Ian trailed in a low tone so only I could hear.

"It's fine. He won't," I assured him.

Ian nodded. "Just get me if you need me."

"Okay."

"Do you know what you want?"

"Burger," I muttered. "Medium well."

He nodded again before looking over to Micah.

"I'll do the same," Micah said with a slight smile.

Ian obviously didn't return the smile and just walked away.

"He seems... pleasant," Micah said with a strange look on his face.

I snorted a laugh. "Right."

"So..."

"Do we have to do this?" I interrupted in a sharp tone.

"Do what?" he wondered, quirking his head to the side.

"Talk. I'd rather we just didn't."

"Elijah," Micah started with a sigh. "I just– I want to talk."

"I don't care."

"I'm sorry," he said in a pleading tone. "I'm sorry for everything."

I couldn't help but laugh. He looked at me like I was crazy.

"It doesn't matter," I told him, taking a sip of my water. "It changes nothing and I'm not going to accept your apology just so you can feel better about yourself."

"That's not–"

"It is though," I cut him off. "You feel guilty so you want to talk it out so you can feel like you made things better and you can sleep better at night."

He didn't say anything.

"But it doesn't fucking matter," I snapped. "You outed me to the team when I trusted you and then I *had* to come out to my mother because if I didn't, she would've found out from one of them!"

I was testing the waters with Micah when I came out to him. I wanted to have at least him on my side when I came out to my mother, but that didn't happen.

"Not only that, but you were my best friend and you didn't do anything to stop them from bullying me *and* you didn't do anything to support me when I came out," I continued.

"I didn't know what to do," Micah sadly admitted. "I just told Landon because I didn't know what to do."

"You told him in the locker room full of the team," I hissed. "And you didn't need to *do* anything."

He was about to speak again but I cut him off.

"And you're such a sheep. You can't think for yourself so you needed to tell someone else so they could tell you how to think."

"I should have supported you," he said. "I wanted to."

"But you didn't," I finished for him.

"I wish I did."

"I don't care, Micah," I said, glaring at him. "It's too late now."

"My dad told me he talked to Dave," Micah changed the subject.

"So?"

"Dave was saying how him and your mom wanted you to move back in and go back to church," Micah started. "My dad told him they should let you stay with your dad. Dave wasn't happy about that."

"Why does this matter to me?"

Micah sighed. "There are people in the church who care about you and want what's best for you. My family is included in that."

Ian came over with our food before I could say anything, not that I had anything to say. I didn't care about Micah's lame attempts to seem like he was the good guy.

Micah thanked Ian for the food, but Ian stayed at the table looking at me.

"You're my last table and then my shift is over. I can drive you home if you want," Ian offered, though it seemed more like he was just telling me that he was driving me home.

"Sure," I said with a nod.

Ian left us and Micah and I ate our meal in silence. Once we were done, Ian brought the check and that was when I realized how much of an idiot I was.

"Fuck," I muttered, patting my empty pockets.

"What?" Micah asked as he opened his wallet.

"I don't have my wallet," I told him. "Or my phone."

Micah just waved me off. "Don't worry about it. I'll pay."

As much as I didn't want Micah doing anything for me, I really had no other choice but to let him pay. Ian came back to grab the card and then Micah and I were left in an awkward silence once again.

"I really am sorry for everything," Micah said, causing me to roll my eyes. "I know it doesn't mean anything, but I want to say it."

"You know what you can do?" I asked as a thought occurred to me.

"What?"

"Get the team to leave me alone. They've been messaging me nonstop and I'm sick of it," I said, raising my eyebrows.

"They have?"

I just nodded.

"Yeah," Micah said, clearing his throat. "I'll talk to them."

Ian came back to the table with the receipt and placed it in front of Micah.

"Give me a few minutes, Ellis," Ian said before walking away.

"I'm happy I got to see you, Elijah," Micah told me after signing the receipt and leaving a generous tip.

"Okay."

"Ian is taking you home?" Micah asked.

"Yes."

"Okay," he said, standing from his seat. "I hope everything ends up okay with you."

I just nodded and Micah made his way out of the restaurant.

I stared blankly down at the table until Ian came back and shook my shoulder.

"I just have to help close up," he informed me.

"That's fine."

I waited a little while for Ian. We didn't speak as he cleaned up the table but we really didn't need to. He knew I wasn't in a good state of mind and he definitely wouldn't know what to say to me.

Once he was finished at the restaurant, he led me out to his car.

"You drive a mini van?" I asked as we got into the vehicle.

"It's my mom's," he muttered. "I don't have a car."

"Do you work a lot?"

"Whenever I can," he answered in a bored tone as he pulled out of the parking lot. "Why were you out with that guy?"

"I just ran into him," I said with a sigh. "Didn't wanna go home and he suggested dinner."

"Was it a date?"

I scoffed and gave him a disgusted look. "Absolutely not."

"Okay..."

"What?" I snapped.

"It's just weird you were out with someone from your old school," Ian said.

I didn't even know how to respond to that. I knew it was weird but it wasn't like it was planned.

"Did something happen?" Ian asked. If I didn't know any better, I would say he sounded concerned.

"I just needed to get away for a little bit," I told him with a sigh.

"Did something happen with Fox?" he questioned further.

I lifted my head up to face him.

"Let's just say he doesn't like me anymore," I said. "He could do better anyway."

Ian scoffed, shaking his head. "There is no way that's true."

"Well you weren't there so..."

Ian just shook his head again.

The two of us didn't speak much for the rest of the ride to my house. Once we got there, I thanked Ian and hopped out of his car, noticing the lights on at the house. I didn't even get to the door before Dad had thrown it opened with a panicked look on his face.

"Elijah!" he exclaimed when I reached him, pulling me inside. "Where the hell were you? I was worried sick about you!"

His words confused me. I didn't think my absence would have been noticed by my family.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was a big deal..."

Dad shook his head at me. "When you go somewhere you tell me and you *bring your phone* ."

"I didn't realize I didn't have my phone until right before I came home," I told him.

"You need to pay more attention," Dad said in a stern tone. He had never been this way with me, but I couldn't really blame him. I made him worried, and made him wait up for me. He deserved to be pissed.

"Dan," Mindy interjected, coming to stand next to him and putting her hand on his shoulder. "Let's talk about this in the morning and just be glad he's home."

Dad visibly relaxed at her touch and nodded, placing his hand over her's.

"Go to sleep, Elijah," he said. "We'll talk in the morning."

Mindy gave me a reassuring look and motioned her head toward the stairs. I turned and immediately ran up to my room. Seeing Dad like that caused a pit in my stomach to grow. I had worried him and disappointed him. He had been nothing but good to me since I got here and I was awarding him by being a shitty son.

I couldn't hold the tears back once I was in my bedroom with the door closed, lying face first on my bed.

I was too fucking emotional.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

What did you think about Elijah going to the church and seeing Micah? Was that what you expected? What about seeing Ian? Let me know!

Also, I hope everyone is continuing to stay safe during this time. Please participate in social distancing and stay home as much as you can!

Also also, I want to thank @Nestea_Official for making this amazing cover! Please check it out!

32

My eyes slightly burned when I opened them the next morning, tired from all the crying I did the night before. I sat up on the bed and rubbed my eyes as the smell of breakfast made its way into my room.

I was nervous to go downstairs but I knew I couldn't stay in my room all day. Dad made it clear he wanted to talk and I had hockey in a couple hours.

The family was already downstairs by the time I got there. Josh gave me an impassive look while Ava looked angry as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Good morning, Elijah," Dad called out as he stood in front of the stove. "You're just in time for breakfast."

I apprehensively sit down at the table with my siblings, across from Ava and the death glare she was sending me.

"Yes Ava?" I asked in a wary tone.

"I'm mad at you," she replied.

"Sorry," I muttered as Dad put a plate full of food down in front of me.

"Eat up," he said with a smile. "You need all the energy you can get for hockey today."

It surprised me that his mood had changed so drastically from the night before, but I realized I shouldn't be all that surprised. He had always been good at managing his emotions.

"How are you feeling?" Mindy asked as she sat down beside me.

I shrugged. "Fine."

She gave me a knowing look but didn't press any further. That was one of the things I loved about Mindy. She was caring but she knew when to press further and when not to.

Dad sat down across from me and whispered something to Ava which caused her to uncross her arms and start eating. He smiled over at me to which I reluctantly returned. We finished eating breakfast with small talk that I didn't partake in.

"We have to get going," Josh told our parents.

"Is it that time already?" Dad asked, turning around to look at the clock before turning back to us. "Well you boys have fun."

After changing into more athletic clothing and grabbing my stuff, I met Josh out at the car after saying goodbye to the rest of the family.

I could tell he was itching to start a conversation with me as he backed out of the driveway and started toward the school. I had no idea what I would say to him, so I planned on keeping my mouth shut for as long as I could.

Of course, that didn't last very long.

"Elijah," Josh called out, clearing his throat.

"Hm?"

"I wanted to uh– I want to apologize," he stammered. "For what I said last night."

I sighed, leaning my head on the cool window.

"It's fine Josh."

"It was stupid and I was just upset–"

"Josh, seriously," I cut him off. "It's fine. You were right anyway."

He let out a heavy sigh. "No, I wasn't."

"Yes you were and I shouldn't have brought up Trevor," I told him. "You had every right to call me out on my bullshit."

"Elijah," Josh started, shaking his head. "I don't actually believe what I said about you."

"Well you should," I muttered, looking out the window.

"Stop that," he snapped.

"You don't need to apologize," I muttered. "And we don't need to talk about it."

Josh sat agitated in his seat for the rest of the ride to school while I enjoyed the silence. This definitely wasn't the time for Josh and I to have a heart to heart. I was too emotionally spent and he was feeling too guilty.

As soon as we got to the school I got out of the car and grabbed my things, heading inside ahead of Josh. Most of the team was already in the gym when I got there.

Since this was supposed to be a day for team building, we were going to be off ice which I hated. I would have much rather been on my skates, batting a puck around.

Of course, the first person I made eye contact with when I entered the room was Fox. We stared at each other for a few moments, an undetectable emotion in Fox's eyes, before he turned away.

So we were back to this.

Josh came into the gym soon after me and placed his things down next to mine, not saying anything.

Coach Silva and Merton came out of the office and Silva blew his whistle to have us gather around him.

"Thank you all for sparing your Saturday," Coach Silva started. "We have a strong team here, but there is something holding us back."

The team was silent.

"Ask me what's holding us back," Coach Silva demanded.

"What's holding us back?" everyone answered in unenthusiastic tones.

"I'm glad you asked," he said with a grin. "Teamwork! There are too many cliques within this team, not enough communication or trust. Teams don't work like that. We could have all the talent in the world but if we can't work as a team we have nothing."

"We have created some different team exercises that will require you to work together and communicate," Coach Merton explained. "Gaining these communication skills will help you with communication on the ice."

"First things first," Coach Silva said, looking around to each of us. "Trust falls."

I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Ellis," Coach Silva called out, causing everyone to look at me. "You look worried. Why?"

I shrugged, clearing my throat. "I don't wanna fall."

"See, there is no trust," Coach Silva announced. "Why don't you go first, Elijah?"

I let out a sigh but made my way over to the raised platform anyway while the coaches instructed everyone else to crowd around and get ready to catch me. This felt like the scene straight out of *Mean Girls* .

"Don't worry Ellis. I'll catch ya," Alex said in a teasing tone.

Once I was on the platform, I turned my back to the team and waited for more instruction. Coach Silva started counting down from three and once he was done, I fell backwards.

Luckily, the team caught me with ease and gently placed me back on my feet. My skin burned from where Fox has touched me. I didn't even have to look to know where he was. I knew how his touch felt.

"Good," Coach Silva praised. "Ridley, go next."

I watched at Fox strode up onto the platform. I hated myself for staring at the way his slender legs filled out his tight fitting athletic pants. I wasn't supposed to be pining after him.

Coach did his countdown again and Fox sent himself backwards, all of us catching him as he fell down into our arms. I looked down at him to see that his eyes were on me as we set him back on the ground.

"I'll go next if you guys promise not to drop me," Alex said, pulling my eyes away from Fox to look at him.

"We won't drop you," Ryan assured him with an eye roll.

Alex hurried his way up on the platform and barely waited for the countdown before throwing himself down into our arms.

"It was like you wanted to get dropped," Ian remarked with a scoff, shaking his head as he let go of Alex.

"Well, now I have more trust in you," Alex said with a shrug.

Eventually we had gone through everyone and surprisingly, no one ended up on the floor. I didn't know how much trust this would actually build within the team, but I was surprised that we hadn't dropped anyone.

"Next up we're doing an activity called the hole in space," Coach Silva announced. "You have to work as a team to get everyone through and on the other side without letting them touch it."

I really wasn't keen on being touched so much by my teammates.

The coaches led us over to where they had set up the "fence" and we gathered on one side.

"Half of you need to go to the other side," Coach Silva instructed.

I quickly moved to the other side, hoping Fox wouldn't follow. He didn't. But then I realized it didn't matter what side he stayed on; he would have to touch me either way.

"Alright let's start," Fox said to the team. "You guys send someone over." He pointed to our side.

"I'll go," Alex volunteered.

We held our arms out and lifted Alex up, starting to send him through the rope.

Fox grabbed his head, keeping Alex's hair from touching the rope.

"You gotta tie your hair back or something," Fox muttered.

"Just hold it!"

We slowly transferred Alex through the rope and over to the other side successfully, without letting him touch the rope.

"Good!" Coach Silva called out. "It counts if your clothes touch, you have to start over."

Fox's side decided to send Jude over to us, but he let his shoe touch at the very last second.

"Jude!" Ryan complained, shaking his head.

Jude just rolled his eyes and walked back over to the other side so we could start again. Once we successfully got him through to our side, my team volunteered me to go next.

They lifted me easily and sent me through the ropes. Fox was the first on the other side to grab hold of me. His touch was gentle yet firm as he shifted my body through the rope and helped me into the arms of the team on his side. I was relieved once I was through and placed back down on the

ground, moving to stand beside Ian and as far away from Fox and Josh as I could get.

"Ian, go next," Fox called out.

"Why don't you go next?" Ian shot back.

The two gave each other hard stares for a moment before Fox gave in with an eye roll. I tried not to look at him as we lifted him up, but he made it hard when his eyes were trained on me. It seemed as though time slowed down while we maneuvered Fox onto the other side, punishing me and making me have to keep my hands on him even longer.

It wasn't quite as awkward when it was Josh's turn, but it still wasn't pleasant. I was happy when we had finally gotten everyone through and we were able to move onto the next activity.

"Good job, guys," Coach Silva complimented. "I know it's cold out, but the next activity is outside so make sure you put your jackets on."

Of course, most of us didn't bring jackets so we had to suffer the cold in just our sweatshirts. We were used to the cold around here, so no one wore coats unless is was absolutely necessary.

"We're going to pair you up for this one," Coach Merton told us. "This is about communication. One of you will be blindfolded and the other will have to give you verbal instructions on how to get through the course successfully, then you switch."

It seemed simple enough and I was almost certain I would be paired with Ian, so it wouldn't be too bad. That was until Ian got paired with someone else and Coach Merton paired me with Corey, Number 21, the guy who said I should get dressed in the girl's locker room.

"Hey, Ellis," Corey said as he walked over to me, clearing his throat.

"Hey."

I sighed, looking around at the other pairings. It seemed as though the coaches had split everyone away from their friends. Fox was paired with the kid that had slammed me into the boards just before the incident with Corey, and he didn't look happy about it.

"Do you want to go first?" Corey asked, grabbing my attention.

"Sure," I replied, crossing my arms over my chest.

There were ten courses set up and each pairing was placed in front of one. The courses were just lines drawn on the ground, it seemed pretty simple, and there was nothing in the way that Corey could make me walk into.

"You have to keep your partner within the lines," Coach Silva instructed. "If they come outside the lines, you have to start over from the beginning."

Coach Merton began handing out the blindfolds and once he was done, the activity began. I tied the blindfold around my head and over my eyes, waiting for instruction from Corey.

"Can you see anything?" Corey asked. He was probably waving his hand in front of my face.

"No."

"Okay, take three steps forward," Corey began. I followed his instructions and waited for him to speak again. "Take, like, half a step."

I sighed and did what he said. We went through the rest of the course with Corey giving me vague instructions and I never stepped out of the lines. Or, if I did, Corey never told me. Once we reached the end, I tore the blindfold off and handed it over to him.

The coaches had us all alternate courses when everyone finished so we would be unfamiliar with the new one. Fox and his partner ended up at the course next to ours and I tried my hardest not to look over at him, though I could feel his stare on me.

Once we were done with the activity, we did some off ice conditioning and eventually the coaches let us leave. I was happy to get out of there. So happy, I rushed around and didn't look where I was going, causing me to bump into a shirtless Fox Ridley.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Elijah," he said, grabbing my arm as I tried to walk away.

I raised my eyebrows at him, willing him to continue even though I didn't really want to speak to him at the moment. It wasn't that I was angry with him. I was just burnt out and emotionally spent from the night before.

Fox didn't say anything, his mouth hanging open like he was trying to pull the words out. I looked down at where his hand was gripping my arm and he immediately let go.

"I'll see you around, Fox," I said with a sigh, grabbing my things and leaving the locker room to wait for Josh by the car.

The car ride home was silent and for that I was grateful. I wasn't looking for apologies from Josh, or even Fox. What was said, was said, and there was nothing to change that. What was said was true and I didn't need either of them trying to convince themselves, or me, that it wasn't.

I was grateful once we had gotten home, ready to take a nap in the comfort of my own room. I briefly greeted Dad and Mindy and tried to get by them to the stairs after Josh.

"Elijah," Dad called out as I was about to go to my room.

"Hm?"

"I'd like to talk to you," he said, motioning for me to follow him.

I nodded and went with him into the kitchen, the two of us sitting across from each other at the table.

"I've been struggling with what to do about what happened last night," Dad admitted, folding his hands in front of him.

"I didn't mean to worry you," I assured him.

"I know you didn't," he said with a sigh. "But I can't have that happening, Elijah. I can't have you disappearing on me like that."

"I know."

"I thought you agreed to talk to me about what bothers you," Dad continued. "Didn't we make that agreement?"

I sighed. "Yes."

"Then can we please follow through with that?"

"I just had a rough night," I told him, avoiding eye contact.

"That's not good enough, Elijah." I could hear the pain in his voice. He just wanted to help me. He was basically pleading.

"I just–" I stammered. "I just feel like I don't belong here. Or anywhere."

Dad's face softened and he reached out to grab my hand on the table.

"And I made Josh mad but the things he said were true," I continued. "And I made Fox mad. It just made me realize I don't fit here like I thought I could."

"What do you mean you don't fit here?"

"I don't fit!" I said. "Not in this family. Not with those friends."

"Elijah..." Dad trailed. "What can I do to show you you *do* belong here? You are part of this family."

I just shrugged.

Dad sighed, rubbing his forehead in frustration. Luckily for him, he didn't have to say anything as Mindy made her way into the kitchen and sat down beside me.

"I don't mean to butt in, but I figured you could both use some support talking about this," Mindy said, placing a comforting hand on my back.

Dad nodded and Mindy continued.

"Elijah, I love you like you're my own son," she told me. "I love having you here. I know Josh said some bad things to you, and I'll let him make up for that himself, but those things were not true."

"What did Josh say?" Dad asked, a look of confusion on his face.

"Nothing," I muttered.

"Let the boys deal with it, Dan," Mindy said, rubbing circles on my back.

He reluctantly nodded, shooting me a concerned look.

"Your father doesn't know what to do because any normal parents would punish their kid for running off," Mindy told me, causing me to look over at her.

"You can punish me."

"But we don't want to do that and in fact, neither of us think that would be effective," Dad continued.

"So," Mindy started. "We decided we are going to act more like a family in this house."

"Okay..." I trailed.

"I'm talking mandatory family dinners, family activity nights, saying we love each other often," Mindy continued.

"We want to make this a better environment for everyone," Dad said with a small smile. "We should've done it ages ago."

I nodded. "Okay."

Mindy placed a kiss on my cheek. "This starts Monday," she said.

"Do you want to say anything?" Dad asked me.

There was plenty I was thinking but nothing I wanted to say. I didn't think any amount of time spent with this family would make anything better, but I supposed I could let Dad and Mindy try. They had already done so much for me and the least I could do was go along with their plans.

"I'm tired," I replied.

Dad nodded. "Okay, go ahead and rest up. I'm sure you had a long day."

And I did.

**

Sooooo what did you think about team building? And Elijah having to be paired with Corey? And his talk with his Dad and Mindy?

Also, I HATE online school.

Anyway thanks for reading!

33

"Watch out!" Austin screamed as he stumbled past me on his skates, falling forward onto the ice. I couldn't help but chuckle at him.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

Austin nodded, trying to push himself up but slipping again.

"I don't know how you do this as a sport," he muttered as I pulled him up to his feet.

"Lots of practice."

It was Holly and Claudia's idea for the group to go ice skating on Saturday night. The rest of the group wasn't too keen on the idea but when we decided there was nothing else for us to do, we went along with it.

After my nap earlier in the day, I was ready to get out of the house.

I looked ahead and saw Lexa and Nadia holding hands while they were skating, shaking their heads at us.

"Can you pull me?" Austin asked, holding out his hand.

I nodded and grabbed him, pulling him along with me around the rink. Even with my guidance he had trouble staying on his feet.

"This is why I hate ice skating," he complained with a scoff.

"Aw, aren't you two so cute," Nadia teased as she skated by us, motioning toward our hands.

"Shut up," Austin shot back. "Since when do you two know how to ice skate?"

"It's not like it's hard," Lexa replied.

"Better watch out, Elijah," Nadia said with a coy smile. "I think having you pull him around the ice is Austin's way of flirting with you."

I couldn't help but laugh a little at that. "I doubt it."

"More like it's my way of not dying out here," Austin muttered.

"Where did Holly and Claudia go?" I asked as I looked around the rink. I saw Johnny and Trevor over on the other side, but the girls were nowhere to be found.

"Probably making out somewhere," Nadia said with a shrug.

I had yet to see if Claudia had gotten any better at skating, but I highly doubted it.

"I'm taking a break," Austin announced, grabbing onto the boards to keep himself up.

"So are we," Lexa said. "We were just about to go get some hot chocolate."

"Do you guys want any?" Nadia asked.

"I'm good," I replied, shaking my head.

The two of them made their way off of the ice while Austin held himself up. I skated away from him, gliding past Trevor and Johnny as the two slowly skated against the boards.

"Hey Elijah!"

I spun around to see Fawn and Ava skating toward me. My stomach immediately dropped, thinking of the possibility that Fox had brought them here.

"What's up?" I asked the girls as they skated next to me.

"What's it look like?" Ava asked, motioning toward her skates.

"Lose the 'tude," I told her.

Her and Fawn just chuckled as they continued following me.

"Who brought you here?" I asked, my voice filled with dread.

"Wren," Fawn answered. "We tried to get Fox to take us but he was being moody."

"When isn't he being moody," I mumbled, not meaning to say that out loud. Fox and I seemed like we should be perfect together; we were both constantly moody.

Fawn just let out a loud laugh. "You're right."

"Are you staying over there tonight?" I asked Ava to which she nodded.

"Fawn and I are going to pull an all-nighter," Ava said, Fawn enthusiastically nodding in agreement.

We continued skating and eventually I caught back up to Austin who was still holding himself up on the boards.

"Elijah, *help* ," he pleaded, holding his arm out for me to grab.

Ava sent me a wide eyed gaze as I pulled Austin along with me.

"Is that your boyfriend?" she whispered, though not quietly enough.

Austin laughed and gripped me tighter.

"No," I answered, shaking my head.

"Don't be like that, Eli," Austin joked, leaning in to plant a kiss on my cheek.

"Stop," I said, shoving him lightly.

"Don't!" he said in a panicked tone, nearly falling over.

"I won't tell Dad," Ava assured me.

I just sighed and steadied Austin. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Your other brother is more my type," Austin told her, earning a smack in the shoulder from me and a look of confusion from Ava.

"Shut up," I grumbled.

"I'm just being real with you."

"You guys are weird," Ava said.

"Elijah, I have to pee. Bring me to the exit," Austin instructed. "Sorry ladies. Duty calls."

I just rolled my eyes at him and bid Ava and Fawn a goodbye before dragging Austin across the ice and back to where our shoes were. He quickly changed out of his skates and back into his sneakers before running off toward the bathroom.

"Elijah, is it?" a voice called out. I turned to see Wren was sitting on the bench beside me. I hadn't even noticed he was there until he said something.

"Uh, yeah."

"Fox's friend?"

I just nodded. If that was what you could call me.

"Come sit," Wren offered, though it sounded more like a command. And for some reason, I listened to him no matter how much I didn't want to. I took a seat beside Wren and awkwardly scratched the back of my neck.

"I just wanted to see how you're doing," Wren said in a kind tone. I couldn't help but feel like he was analyzing my every move.

"I'm good," I replied, clearing my throat.

"Fox was worried about you the other night," he told me. "It made him even more unbearable than usual."

"Oh."

"That's just how he gets when he's nervous," Wren continued. "Annoyed easily, constantly pacing, doesn't listen."

Wren's tone was smooth and almost cunning. It made it seem like there was something he knew that I didn't.

"Well, it was my fault he was like that," I told him, for some reason feeling like I had to defend Fox.

It was strange for me to be speaking to his brother, and I didn't like hearing Wren speak ill of him. It caused an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach, my insides twisting.

"No, it wasn't," Wren denied.

I finally turned to look at him. His face was calm with a slight smile planted there, identical to the one he showed me the night I left Fox's house. The smile wasn't kind, but seemed to be more mocking, like he had me figured out and there was nothing I could say to him that he didn't already know.

"What do you mean?" I dared to ask.

Wren's sneering smile widened.

"The way Fox acts isn't your fault," he told me. "Besides, I heard you two fighting that night."

My eyes widened and I wanted nothing more than to get myself out of this situation. He must have seen the panic on my face because Wren's eyebrows raised and his smile retracted slightly.

"Don't panic," he said.

"What did you hear?"

"Enough."

My mind filled with dread.

"I told you don't panic," he reminded me. "There is nothing new I learned about my brother from hearing you guys."

Wren confused me to no end.

"So..." I trailed. "You already knew..."

"That he's gay?" Wren asked in a low tone so that no one would hear. "Yes, I've known for years."

This didn't seem to add up. Fox had told me he and Wren had hated each other their whole lives. Why would he trust him with something that he wanted to hide?

"He told you that?" I asked.

"Of course not," Wren replied with a slight laugh. "But it wasn't hard to figure out."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "How are you so sure you're right?"

"Part of the reason Fox hates me so much is because he can't hide anything from me," Wren explained. "He's an open book to me and I call him out on his bullshit. I see right through him and he hates it."

"He also hates you because you're an ass to him," I let the words slip out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Well, yeah," Wren chuckled. "He's easy to rile up."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to know that I know," Wren answered, though it was vague and didn't help me.

"Does Fox know that you know?"

Wren smirked. "No and I would like to keep it that way, though I'm sure you'll tell him anyway."

I shook my head at him, my jaw tense as I looked at his sardonic expression. I could see why Fox didn't like him much; his demeanor was extremely narcissistic.

"Then you wouldn't have told me if you didn't want him knowing," I remarked. "Since you're so sure that I'll tell him."

Wren pondered on my words for a moment before nodding, his lips quirking up.

"You're smarter than I anticipated," he said.

I didn't say anything else to him. Wren was hard to be around and I felt like he was reading my like a book, like he claimed he did to Fox.

I looked past him to see Claudia and Holly making their way over to us. I silently thanked them for saving me from this situation.

"Hey, Wren," Claudia greeted, her arm around Holly's waist. "I didn't know you were back from school."

"Just came back Friday," he said, looking her up and down. "You look good, Claudia."

She just laughed at him. "You won't charm me."

He chuckled. "It was worth a shot."

Somehow this situation got even more uncomfortable after the girls had arrived.

Holly sat down beside me on the bench to put her skates back on, causing me to have to move even closer to Wren.

"Where were you guys?" I whispered to Holly while Claudia spoke with Wren.

"The hot cocoa line was long," Holly told me.

"You don't even have hot cocoa," I said.

Holly just grinned. "We drank it over there."

And they made out somewhere, but Holly was too sweet to mention that.

"Anyway, I have to get the girls home," Wren announced, his leg brushing against mine as he stood up from the bench. "They haven't had dinner yet."

I watched as he walked over to the edge of the rink, calling out to Ava and Fawn. The girls were quick to come off the ice and sit down next to me for to put on their shoes.

"Bye Ava. Have fun. Love you," I said to my sister as she got up to leave.

"Love you," she replied, shoving my shoulder.

"It was nice talking to you, Elijah," Wren said with that stupid smile.

I just nodded and he left with the girls trailing behind him.

"Are you coming back on the ice?" Holly asked Claudia, leaning over me to talk to her as she sat on my other side.

"You go. I'll be on in a few minutes," Claudia answered.

Holly just shrugged and headed back to the rink, meeting up with Nadia and Lexa.

Claudia and I were silent for a few moments before she spoke up.

"So..." she trailed. "What did you and Wren talk about?"

"Not much," I lied.

She gave me a knowing look, raising her eyebrows like she saw right through my lie.

"I know what he's like," Claudia said. "He probably wouldn't have even talked to you if it was 'not much.'"

Sometimes I forgot that she and Fox dated. No wonder she knew Wren so well. When I did remember, it put a sour taste in my mouth.

"He was just talking about Fox," I admitted with a sigh.

"About you and Fox?"

My eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean *you and Fox* ," Claudia replied in a low tone.

Great. She knew too?

"I know about Fox's sexuality," she admitted in a soft tone. "That's why he broke up with me."

"Really?"

Claudia nodded. "He couldn't take it anymore I guess. I don't blame him."

"Yeah..."

"And I see the way he looks at you," she told me with a smile. "It wasn't hard to put two and two together."

"He doesn't look at me in any special way," I muttered, my cheeks heating up.

Claudia scoffed before letting out a laugh. "He looks at you the way I wished he looked at me when we were dating."

I shook my head at her, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Anyway, I just want to say don't let Wren intimidate you," Claudia continued. "He's not as bad as Fox wants you to think. And he's not as clever as he wants you to think."

"You seem to know him well," I murmured, giving her a sideways glance.

My jealousy toward Claudia wasn't fair to her, but I couldn't help it.

"I was with him before I was with Fox," she casually confessed.

"What?" I asked, surprised with wide eyes.

"Well we weren't *dating*... " she trailed. "We were hooking up and I ended up falling for Fox."

"Is that why they don't get along?" I wondered.

An uncomfortable itch crept up on me at the thought of their feud being about Claudia.

Claudia laughed. "No. They don't get along because they are too close in age and *way* too similar to each other. It drives them insane."

She must have noticed the disbelieving look on my face.

"Wren didn't care when I started dating Fox," she assured me. "Wren was a player, probably still is. I didn't really matter to him."

"That's sad," I said.

"Not really," she replied with a shrug. "Lucky for you, Fox is not like him in that way."

"Fox and I aren't together," I told her, making sure no one around us could hear.

"But you should be," she countered. "You'd be good for each other."

I just scoffed.

Fox didn't need me the way I needed him. He could have anyone who was willing to be what he needed, but I couldn't find someone that would fill the void he left in me.

"Look Elijah," Claudia started in a low tone. "Fox is still one of my closest friends, and you are so good for him."

"I'm not," I said, my voice slightly cracking. "I'm not what he needs."

Claudia gave me a sympathetic look. "Maybe you need each other."

I shook my head and she let out a sigh.

"Do what is good for you, but I'm just saying, you seem like you make each other really happy," Claudia told me, clapping her hand down on my shoulder before standing up and heading back over to where her skates were and pulled them on so she could meet Holly on the ice.

I sat alone and pondered on her words for a little while, but I wasn't left alone for long. Eventually Trevor came off the ice and sat down beside me, letting out a deep breath.

"Man, that is tiring!" he said in a breathless tone. "My feet are killing me."

He pulled off his skates to replace them with his sneakers.

"Hey, are you okay?" Trevor asked when he noticed me staring off onto the ice.

I looked over at him with a tight smile.

"I'm fine," I replied.

"That's a lie but I'll let it slide," he told me with a grin as he tied his laces.

I shook my head at him.

"You know, Josh called me the other night," Trevor told me after a few moments of silence.

"He did?" I asked in a surprised tone, my eyebrows raised.

"He didn't know where you were," Trevor continued. "He sounded worried."

The fact that Josh was desperate enough to call Trevor, especially after finding out he had told me about their kiss, was shocking on its own.

"I'm surprised he called you," I said.

Trevor chuckled. "Me too."

Looking at Trevor, I began to wonder: why couldn't I just like him? It would be so much easier. We could be together publicly without having to hide it. He was nice, sensible, and caring. He was truly anyone's dream, but I couldn't force myself to have feelings for him. And I couldn't use him or lead him on.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Trevor asked with a thoughtful expression when he noticed me staring at him.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I assured him. "Just thinking."

"Well, if you ever want to share, I'll listen," he said with a grin.

I nodded. "Thanks, Trev."

Once everyone was ready to go, we left, Trevor dropping me off at home. We were all going to spend the night at Trevor's, but Dad wanted me to come home. I couldn't blame him. I *had* just disappeared on him for hours two nights ago. He probably just wants to know that I'm safe at home for a little bit.

I finished my nightly routine and got in bed with a sigh. I looked over at the painting from Trevor that hung on my wall and then over to my nightstand where I left the bracelet he made me. He was always so kind and welcoming, but I still rejected him. He was just another person that I disappointed.

I turned on my side and closed my eyes, hoping to fall asleep, but I remained wide awake. A tap on my window startled me and I stayed completely still, too frightened to move. The tapping continued and I slowly turned to see who was there.

I wasn't prepared for who I saw.

**

Hi everyone. Hope you're all doing well and staying safe.

What did you think about the ice skating trip with the GSA kids? What about Elijah's talk with Wren and Claudia? Were any of your surprised? Who do you think is at the window?

Thanks for reading!

34

"What the hell," I muttered, getting up from bed to open the window.

It had started snowing out and it was coming down quite hard.

Fox was on the other side of the window, his cheeks rosy from the cold, snowflakes littering his hair and the front of his glasses, and his face etched in a frown. I opened the window and he immediately came inside, pushing me aside to get in the room.

"It's cold as shit outside," he cursed, rubbing his hands together for warmth as I shut the window.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, moving past him to sit on the bed.

"I obviously am here to see you," he said, blowing warm air onto his hands, then taking his glasses off to clean off the lenses with his shirt.

I just rolled my eyes. "If you wanted to see me, you could have used the front door.

"So you could slam it in my face?"

"I could have slammed the window in your face."

"You wouldn't though," he pointed out, pointing at me with his glasses. "Because it's cold as shit, it's snowing, and I could have fallen off your house."

"So the smart solution to you was instead of going to the front door, risking your life to climb up to my window in the snow?"

"Well, you can't say I never risked my life for you."

I just scoffed, throwing myself backward on the bed. Fox came to sit beside me after he situated his glasses back on his face. I stared up at the ceiling while he stared down at me. It took all of my will power to keep my eyes off of him. He *knew* how his glasses made me feel.

"Will you talk to me?" he asked, his voice sounding desperate.

"If you're here to apologize, you can save your breath," I told him, keeping my eyes trained on the ceiling.

He looked down at me with a puzzled expression. "I know I owe you more than an apology but—"

"You don't owe me an apology," I cut him off with a sigh. "You were right and I just got mad."

Fox shook his head and let out a groan. "You're being, like, so stupid right now."

I glared at him. "You can go."

"Elijah," Fox said in a pleading tone. "I'm sorry for what I said. It doesn't really change how I feel, but I shouldn't be projecting my insecurities onto you. You had every right to reject me."

"Do we have to do this right now?"

"Yes!"

I sighed again and sat up to look at him. His damn glasses looked so good his concerned face. He was too good looking for his own good.

"You deserve to be with someone that can be what you need," I told him. "Someone that can make you happy while you do what you need to do."

"You're making no sense right now," he said in an annoyed tone, shaking his head. "I don't want *someone* . I want you."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Fox cut me off.

"And I know I can't have you right now," he said. "But I'm not looking for anyone else. I want to be really clear about that."

His words caused my heart to flutter and my stomach to be unsettled. I kept wanting to convince myself that he deserved better, but when he said things like that to me, I wanted to keep him for myself.

"What if I were to look for someone else?" I let the words slip out before I could stop them.

Fox stopped for a moment and looked away before looking back at me, his lips tightly pressed together.

"You deserve to be happy too," he said in a low tone. "If you want someone else... I'll just have to deal with it." It sounded like it pained him to say those words.

"I don't want anyone else," I mumbled. Fox nodded, though he looked relieved.

"I don't know why you think I don't owe you an apology," Fox said, raising his eyebrows at me. "I didn't need to say those things the way I said them."

"That doesn't make them less true," I muttered.

Fox sighed. "You know, I came here that night. I looked for you."

"You did?"

"And Josh said you and him got into it too," Fox continued.

I let out a small breath. "He was right about what he said too. I'm not angry at either of you."

"I don't know what he said," Fox started. "But I know he feels bad about it, so something tells me what he said isn't true either."

"You don't know—"

"I know that you wouldn't have run away if it didn't upset you," Fox interjected. "And if he said something to upset you it was because he was angry and saying things he didn't mean."

I just shook my head. There was no use explaining the way I felt to him.

Fox startled me when he placed his hand on my shoulder. I looked down at his hand and then up into his eyes. His gorgeous eyes.

"I just want you to be okay," he said in a whisper.

I couldn't stop myself from leaning in and placing my lips on his. The kiss was soft and slow. His hand moved from my shoulder to the back of my head, pulling me closer to him. The kiss began to get more heated and that was what pulled me back to my senses.

"I shouldn't have done that," I said in a breathless tone, pulling away from him.

"I'm glad you did."

He gave me a soft smile that made me melt. I wanted him to be mine more than anything, to be able to be this close to him forever.

Fox placed his hand on my cheek and ran his thumb along the corner of my mouth, looking at me with a soft smile.

"If you need me to distract you... I'd be okay with that," he told me, looking at my lips.

"No," I immediately answered, grabbing his hand to pull it away from my face. "That's not fair to you."

I couldn't commit to him, but using him as a distraction to make me feel better about myself wasn't an option. It was fun to be friends with some benefits before I knew what he wanted from me, but now I knew that arrangement would only hurt the both of us.

"I'm telling you I'm okay with it," he said, looking into my eyes.

"I don't know if *I'm* okay with it," I admitted.

He gave me an understanding look, squeezing my hand that still held his.

"We can just cuddle if you want," he offered with a grin.

I couldn't help but let a small smile creep up onto my face as I nodded, pulling the blankets back so we could both get under them. Fox wrapped his arms around me and I rested my head on his chest, circling my fingers on his chest as one of his hands found its way into my hair.

That was the best night of sleep I had gotten in a long time, wrapped up in Fox's arms.

***

"What are you doing?" I mumbled, rolling over on the bed to see Fox was standing by the window.

"I was gonna go," he told me, causing me to sit up and give him a deadpanned look.

The clock on my nightstand said it was only eight in the morning, and I was in no way ready to be awake yet.

"You don't have to go," I said, hoping I didn't sound too desperate. I didn't really want him to go.

"I didn't know if you would have wanted me to stay," Fox said, making his way back over to the bed.

I rolled my eyes, motioning for him to come back under the covers. Fox complied, instantly wrapping his arms around me and pulling me closer, my back to his chest.

"I still feel like I need to make this up to you," Fox mumbled into the back of my neck. "I just don't know how."

I sighed. "You don't need to do any grand gestures, Fox. Being here is enough."

He huffed but didn't say anything. I knew he still felt weird about it, but I didn't want anything from him.

"I just don't want you to hate me," I admitted to him. "That's all I want."

"That's what I want too," he replied. "For you to not hate me."

"Well, good. Because I don't."

"And I could never hate you."

His voice sounded stern, yet filled with vulnerability. He was showing himself to me in a way that he tried to hide for months.

The way he opened up to me got me thinking about what I had spoken to Wren about last night. The fact that his brother that he swore he hated knew his deepest secret.

It was a dilemma for me, not knowing whether to tell Fox of what his brother knew, or keep it to myself. Telling Fox was exactly what Wren wanted me to do and something told me that I should keep myself from falling into his trap.

"Has your mom talked to you?" Fox asked as I was contemplating in my mind.

"No, why?" I asked.

"Her and Dave were here when you went missing," Fox told me. "They wanted you to go back with them."

I groaned, trying to curl myself closer to him.

"You won't go back with them, right?" Fox asked, his voice soft like he was worried about what I might say.

I shifted around on the bed, turning to face him with his arms still around me.

"I would never go back there," I told him seriously, our eyes staring intently at each other. Fox had taken his glasses off before he got back into bed with me and I could tell how his eyes squinted slightly without them.

"Good," he said in a slightly breathless tone. "You don't deserve to be stuck with them."

Not knowing what to say, I reached out and placed my hand on the side of his head and traced my thumb over the scar on his eyebrow.

Before either of us could say anything, there was a knock on my door. Fox and I instantly pulled apart, tearing the blanket away from our bodies and sitting up.

"Elijah?" Dad called through the door.

"Yeah?" I answered, my voice cracking slightly.

Dad opened the door a jar and stuck his head in.

"I heard voices, I–" he stopped himself when his eyes landed on the boy next to me. "Oh, hi Fox."

"Hi Dan," Fox replied in a calm tone.

"When did you get here?"

"Last night. Sorry for coming without you knowing."

Dad just waved him off with an easy smile. "You're always welcome here, Fox."

"I'm not sure you wanna say that, Dad," I interjected. "He might never leave."

Dad laughed as Fox sent a scowl my way.

"Well you haven't kicked me out yet so I guess that means you want me here," Fox remarked, raising his eyebrows.

Dad laughed again. "Do you boys want to come down and help with breakfast?"

Somehow the two of us ended up down in the kitchen with Dad, Mindy, and Josh. Fox had placed his glasses back on his face, pushing them up on his nose as we descended the stairs. Josh didn't hide his confusion when we entered the kitchen.

"When did you get here?" Josh asked, a pointed look sent Fox's way.

"When did *you* get here?" Fox shot back, earning an eye roll from Josh.

"I live here."

Fox just shrugged and maneuvered through the kitchen to greet Mindy before sitting down beside Josh. My brother stared at him with a scrutinizing gaze as if trying to figure him out, but Fox paid him no mind.

Mindy interrupted Josh's stare when she walked over to the table and motioned for me to sit down.

"You boys can cut up the potatoes," she told us before turning back to the stove for whatever she was making.

And that's what we did. After washing our hands, the three of us sat at the table dicing up potatoes and placing them into a bowl in the middle.

Dad had started playing some music while he and Mindy tended to the stove, singing loudly and dancing around. I looked up at Fox to see him bobbing his head to the music as he concentrated on cutting the potato.

I let out a small chuckle, grinning at him. The sound caused his ears to perk up before he took his attention to me.

"What?" he asked.

"You're funny," I said, my grin widening.

"How am I funny? I was just vibing," Fox replied, his lips quirking upward in a smile.

It was then that Dad started singing obnoxiously loud at Mindy.

" *You wreck me baby! Yeah, you break me in two!"*

To which Mindy sang back.

" *But you move me honey, yes you do."*

"At least I'm not like that guy," Fox said, pointing his thumb toward Dad.

I couldn't keep myself from laughing as I looked over toward Dad and Mindy to see that he was spinning her around the kitchen, seemingly forgetting about the food on the stove.

I glanced back at Fox to see that he was looking at me with a hint of a smile on his face, humming to the tune of the song.

"So are you two good now?" Josh asked, confusion in his tone. Fox and I both turned our attention toward him as he sat there with his eyebrows raised in question.

Fox turned back to me as if he was looking for the answer as well.

I nodded. "We are."

Fox just smiled.

Suddenly, the front door opened and Ava came stomping into the kitchen with Fawn following closely behind her.

"You're home early," Mindy commented. "Hi Fawn."

Fawn greeted my parents before turning to her brother. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Who brought you here?" Fox asked, ignoring his sister's question.

Fawn rolled her eyes. "Wren."

"We came here to use my *Switch* ," Ava told Mindy.

"That's fine. Want some breakfast?" Mindy asked.

"We ate!" Ava replied, walking over next to me at the table.

" *That's* why you're here," Josh said, nudging Fox in the shoulder. "You just don't want to be home with Wren."

Fox rolled his eyes and shoved Josh away from him.

"Shut up," Fox snapped.

"I'm right though aren't I?" Josh joked.

Fox scowled at Josh before sending a softer look at me.

"Something like that," he said.

"You didn't stay with your boyfriend last night?" Ava whispered to me, causing Fox's eyes to bulge out of his head.

"Boyfriend?" Fox asked in a hushed tone.

"I told you he's not, Ava," I said to her with a stern expression.

"Who is she talking about?" Fox asked me, dragging my eyes from my sister to him.

Ava grabbed onto Fawn's wrist and dragged her out of the kitchen to go up to her room.

"Who is Ava talking about?" Fox repeated more urgently.

I rolled my eyes at him while he raised his eyebrows waiting for me to answer.

"Tell me," he urged. I gave him a look to which he rolled his eyes and relented, " *Please* ."

"I was out with GSA last night," I explained. "Her and Fawn saw me with Austin."

Fox's eyes narrowed but he didn't say anything else.

Josh stared at the two of us with a skeptical expression as Fox and I shared a look of understanding. It was by that look from Josh that I thought maybe he had caught on to us.

**

Thanks for reading!

Was anyone surprised Fox was at the window? What did you think about the conversation he had with Elijah? Do you think Elijah should tell Fox Wren knows about them? Do you think Josh knows?

Let me know!

Also, I hope everyone is continuing to stay healthy. I'm having to work during all this so it's been stressful and customers are pretty much the worst.

Stay healthy!

35

Dad had me running errands for him after hockey practice Monday night. He probably saw this as some type of punishment for me disappearing, but I honestly didn't mind it too much.

Christmas was in three days and Dad and Mindy were never the type to get everything we needed all at once. They would probably be sending me out every day until Christmas to pick up food we needed for the holiday.

It was also the night that our mandatory family time was starting so I was trying to prolong the shopping for as long as I could.

It wasn't until I saw Wren standing in front of the cake mixes that I wanted to get out of the store as soon as possible. I even tried backing out of the aisle as quietly as I could but my damn cart betrayed me with its squeaky wheel. Wren turned to look at me with a box of cake mix in his hand and an amused expression.

"Elijah," he said in a smooth tone. "It's nice to see you again."

"Yeah, you too," I lied with a sigh.

Wren chuckled, obviously seeing right through me.

"I saw that Fox had spent the night with you," he told me.

So we were getting right to the important matters.

"So?"

"Did you tell him?" Wren asked.

He didn't have to be specific for me to know what he was talking about. But Wren wasn't stupid, he knew I hadn't told Fox anything. I could tell by the smug look on his face.

"You would know if I did," I replied, moving over against the shelves so someone could get by.

"You're right, I would," Wren responded. "I just can't quite figure out why you haven't."

I hadn't because it felt like Wren had some weird ulterior motive with having me be the one to inform Fox that his brother knew his secret. But I wouldn't tell him that.

"If you want him to know, tell him yourself," I said in a bored tone.

Wren laughed. "You don't know Fox that well, do you?"

I tried not to take offense to that.

"It wouldn't go over well if he heard it from me," Wren continued, an arrogant smile on his face. "He's a bit hot-headed, but I'm sure you know that."

I hated hearing Wren speak that way about him.

"You know, maybe he wouldn't be so hot-headed if you told him yourself and showed him you actually give a fuck about him," I spat, not being able to stop myself.

Wren pondered on my words for a few moments, that stupid smile still occupying his face.

"Well, we've got ourselves in a predicament, Elijah," he said.

"What?"

"Well, if I tell him and he finds out that you kept it from him, what would he do?"

He was trying to unsettle me, I knew that much. Fox wasn't lying when he said his brother thought he was *so smart* . He was cunning and he undoubtedly was used to manipulating people into getting what he wanted.

"He wouldn't hate me," I said in a hard tone. He would never hate me.

Wren nodded. "Maybe you're right."

We both turned to look at Robin as he came down the aisle with a friendly grin. He was the one that reminded me most of their parents, kind and welcoming.

"Hey, Elijah right?" Robin asked, bumping into Wren with his cart.

I nodded, giving him a small smile.

"I can't wait to see you guys play tomorrow," Robin said, taking the cake mix from Wren's hand and placing it in the cart. "I haven't been to a hockey game in so long.

"No games at school?" I asked, wondering where he went.

"There is, but it's not very popular there," Robin replied. "I go to UCLA."

"Oh, nice."

"Anyway, we gotta get going. Ma's been texting me," Robin announced. "It was good seeing you, Elijah. I'll probably see you again tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you then."

Wren didn't say anything as the two of them left. He just looked over his shoulder at me with an expression I couldn't decipher, before turning around and leaving the aisle with his brother.

I waited in the aisle for a few more minutes so I wouldn't bump into the brothers again at the check out. Then I grabbed the cake mix I needed and made my way to the front of the store.

Once I loaded up the car, I drove home without hitting *any* curbs. When I walked in the front door, my hands full with grocery bags, I saw Dad and Josh moving around the furniture in the living room.

They both looked toward me as they were moving the couch up against the far wall.

"Are there more groceries?" Josh asked as they finished moving the couch.

"Yeah."

Josh nodded and left the room and out the door, presumably to get the rest of the groceries from the car.

He had been sucking up to me lately, doing my chores when Dad and Mindy weren't around, offering me the car, and even minding his own damn business about his suspicions with Fox and me, which was surprising for him.

"Thanks for doing the shopping," Dad said as he followed me into the kitchen.

I shrugged, placing the bags down on the counter. "I don't mind doing it."

Dad smiled at me, beginning to put the groceries away.

"Why were you guys moving the furniture?" I asked.

"Mindy asked us to for family night," Dad answered, though it seemed like he didn't know what we were going to be doing.

"Perfect! You're home!" Mindy greeted me as she entered the kitchen. "We have some exciting news and some fun things planned!"

I wasn't sure how fun family activities could be, but I wasn't going to rain on her parade.

"Sit! Dinner is ready!" Mindy announced, kissing the top of my head as I sat down at the table, giving her other children the same treatment when they filed into the room and sat down.

"Did you tell them the news?" Dad asked Mindy as she sat down beside him.

"No, I wanted to wait for you."

Dad smiles at his wife and then looked at each of his children.

"We wanted to tell you guys that the adoption went through," Dad announced. "So now Josh is legally my son."

My eyes immediately drifted over to Josh, a wide smile overtaking his face. I couldn't help but let my lips quirk up slightly at the delighted look he wore.

Things were still awkward between the two of us. I could tell he still felt guilty about what had happened a few nights ago. I couldn't even be angry at him because he had a right to feel the way he had.

"That took forever," Josh said with a laugh.

Dad nodded with a smile of his own. "A bunch of legal stuff. Takes forever but it's done now."

The conversations at dinner were light-hearted. I tried to perk up a bit, not wanting to ruin the night for the family after something exciting had happened, especially for Josh and Dad.

Once we were done eating and had the table cleaned up, Mindy led the rest of us into the living room where all of the furniture had been moved out of the way.

"So," Mindy started with a wide smile, facing all of us with her hands clasped together. "I found this video on YouTube and I thought we could do it together as a family."

"What is it?" Ava muttered, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Family yoga!" Mindy exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

She was met with silence from the rest of us. It wasn't until she cleared her throat and gave Dad a look that he nodded and turned to us.

"It'll be fun guys," Dad tried assuring us, though he didn't look too convinced.

Mindy placed her hands on her hips. "It's calming and you're always complaining about your back, Dan. This will help with that."

Surprisingly, the thought of this activity didn't bother me too much. I was working on not dreading everything I didn't want to do, so this was a start.

"You can't just put the word 'family' in front of something and make it a family activity," Ava remarked.

"Sure I can," Mindy replied with a nod. "We're doing it! I'll set it up on the TV."

The first few poses were quite easy, but it got harder as we went along. Mindy and Ava seemed to be having no trouble at all, but the rest of us were a different story.

"My body does not bend that way," Dad said as he let himself fall flat on his stomach, resting on the floor.

Mindy turned her head to us as her body was practically bent in half.

"Come on, guys. Try it," she said to Josh and I.

We tried it. And we failed. Josh tumbled over, knocking himself into my legs and knocking me down on the floor.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he hovered above me with a concerned expression.

I couldn't keep myself from bursting out into laughter, which caused everyone else to follow my lead.

"This is hopeless, Mindy," I laughed, rolling over onto my side.

She chuckled, throwing her head back. "Maybe I should've picked something a little easier."

Despite everything that had gone on before, it felt nice to sit on the living room floor and laugh with my family.

***

The locker room was buzzing with excitement as we geared up to play our last game before the Masters Tournament.

My eyes wandered around the room, skimming over each of my teammates in search for the one I really wanted to see. It wasn't like Fox to be late. He was always the first one here, being the captain it was his responsibility to be.

Just as I was about to turn to Josh and ask him if he knew where Fox was, the guy in question walked into the locker room, holding a box under his arm. He didn't say anything as he took his spot beside me at the lockers, placing the box down on the bench behind us and getting into his gear.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and, of course, he noticed, sending a coy smile my way.

Once we were all done getting ready, we gathered around to listen to the coaches and Fox talk like we did before every game. Only this time, at the end of their speeches, Fox picked up the box and all eyes looked to me.

"What?" I groaned, feeling uncomfortable at the sudden attention.

"Don't complain," Fox warned with a stern expression, opening the box.

He pulled a black sweatshirt out of the box, much like his own hockey sweatshirt that I had worn before, only this one had my name and number on it.

"We should've gotten you one at the beginning of the season," Fox said as he unfolded the sweatshirt, showing it to me.

I smiled as I looked at it. "You guys didn't have to do that."

"Yes, we did," Ryan interjected with a wide grin. "Everyone on the team needs one."

"Well, thanks," I said as Fox handed it to me.

It was one of the only times I was getting looks of appreciation from the guys on the team other than the ones I had acquainted myself with. It was a small gesture but it still felt good.

Everyone turned back to their lockers as we waited to get out onto the ice. I looked down at the sweatshirt with a smile on my face before gently placing it in my locker.

"As much as I like seeing you wearing mine, I thought it'd be nice for you to have your own," Fox said in a hushed tone, coming up behind me.

I turned and grinned at him. "Thank you."

Fox rolled his eyes, gently shoving me. "Don't."

I just laughed and playfully shook my head.

"Let's go win this thing!" Ryan shouted, causing a chorus of cheers from the team.

Fox grabbed his hockey stick and motioned for me to follow him out of the locker room. The team filed out onto the ice for warm-ups. I glided along the edge, looking into the crowd to see where my family sat. It didn't take me long to find Dad, Mindy, and Ava. My little sister sat right next to Fawn, a bag of popcorn between them. What surprised me was that Fox's entire family was sitting among them, including Wren.

I noticed Fox's attention on the ice in front of him, keeping his eyes from lingering toward the crowd. He was always so focused during hockey, but I couldn't help but feel like there was an added tension to his demeanor at that moment.

The game started poorly. Within a minute of the first period, we had given up a goal. Fox was tense as he sat beside me on the bench and I knew better

than to say anything to him.

At the next whistle, it was our turn to get on the ice. Fox wasted no time winning the face off and getting the puck to Josh, who brought it to our offensive zone. Fox sped down the ice after my brother. Josh passed the puck between the legs of the other team's defender and Fox easily slid it into the goal.

It was times like this where I realized how natural this was for him. He made everything look so easy and elegant.

When I made my way over to the rest of the line who were hugging in celebration, I felt Fox's arm wind itself around me, undoubtedly tighter than he would embrace anyone else on the team.

We managed to pull off a win thanks to Fox and his two goals. I had a few blocked shots that I could feel forming bruises on my legs.

"Good game," Fox said, coming up behind me at the lockers after his shower and clasping his hand down on my shoulder.

"You too," I said with a smile, throwing my new sweatshirt over my head.

I looked away as Fox got dressed, then trained my eyes on him as he shoved the towel through his hair to dry it. He caught me looking and threw the towel at my face.

"Quit staring at me," he said as I let the towel fall to the floor.

My eyes followed him as he sent a wink my way and left the locker room.

When I followed him out, I didn't expect to see our families standing together having a laugh. The two of us stopped short to look at them with confused expressions.

Josh had already made his way out and was having a conversation with Wren and Robin while my parents talked with Fox's parents and Raven. Of course, Fawn and Ava were hanging out and it seemed like Colt was just following them around.

The sight was strange and I didn't know how to feel about it. It seemed as though Fox felt the same way because the two of us stood side by side in unmoving confusion.

"Boys!" Mindy greeted when she saw us, motioning us over to the group. We reluctantly stepped closer, still wondering what was going on.

"We were thinking about heading to dinner together," Vanessa, Fox's mom, said with a smile. "Sound good?"

Fox gave his mother a strange look. "All of us?"

I nudged his ribs with my elbow. He caught my arm in his hand and moved it back to my side.

Somehow we ended up at a buffet style restaurant, all thirteen of us. Our parents seemed to be getting along remarkably well and I couldn't tell if that filled me with excitement or dread.

I was making my way around the buffet when I noticed a presence behind me.

"This is nice isn't it?" Wren asked, moving to stand next to me.

"What is?"

"Our families getting along," Wren said with a chuckle. "Isn't that good for you and Fox?"

I glared at him out of the corner of my eye. "Shut up."

Wren didn't have time to say anything else as Fox walked up to us, a hard stare set on his brother.

"My cue to leave," Wren muttered, walking away from us.

"What were you guys talking about?" Fox asked, his voice sharp.

"Nothing, really," I told him.

"He's been acting really weird around me lately," he said, glancing over his shoulder at his brother.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Fox sighed. "He's just been acting strangely nice all of a sudden."

I couldn't help but let myself smile a little at his words. Maybe Wren was feeling guilty.

"Well maybe that's a good thing," I suggested as I grabbed some food.

"Or maybe he wants something from me," Fox mumbled, following my lead around the buffet.

I just rolled my eyes.

"Is it so hard to believe that your brother just wants to be nicer to you?"

Fox sighed. "I guess not."

We were silent for a few moments before Fox spoke up again.

"He's just always been so hellbent on making sure he was better than me," he continued. "And making sure I knew it."

I thought I heard vulnerability in Fox's tone, but when I glanced at him, his face was set in a hard express with no trace of it. He could only open up so far before he stopped himself.

He started walking back to the table, me following closely behind him and sitting down beside him.

Wren and Josh sat across from us, both giving us knowing looks while the rest of our families remained oblivious.

**

Hey everyone!

What did you think about Elijah seeing Wren and Robin at the store? What about the adoption and family night? And the team gifting Elijah the sweatshirt? What do you think about the families getting together for dinner?

Let me know!

36

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

"Merry Christmas," Dad whispered in my ear as I lay face down in bed.

I groaned, pulling my pillow over my head. Dad was quick to pull it off and sit down beside me on the bed.

"It's your first Christmas living here full time," Dad reminded me, placing his hand on my back.

I picked my head up to glance at him, seeing his loving smile directed back at me.

"First time I don't have to go to church on Christmas," I said, sitting up and rubbing my
eyes.

Dad laughed, moving over so the two of us could sit side by side.

"Isn't that great?" he said, tossing his arm around my shoulder and pulling me to his side.

I nodded, resting my head on him. The two of us sat there for a few silent moments, enjoying each other's company. Dad has always been sappy, but I had a feeling he was getting even more so since I had left last week.

"Ready to go downstairs?" Dad asked as I picked my head up.

I nodded, following him out of the room. He seemed extra excited about this Christmas and I could only assume it was because this was the first Christmas morning we got to spend together since I was a small child.

"Merry Christmas!" Mindy exclaimed, wrapping me up in a hug as soon as I was at the bottom of the stairs.

She had insisted that we all wore matching Christmas pajamas and take a picture in the morning. I looked toward Josh and Ava, who were already sitting by the tree, and took in our matching outfits. We definitely looked like that stereotypical suburban family. The only things we were missing were the white picket fence and the family dog.

"Go sit in front of the tree," Mindy instructed, guiding me into the living room. "I want pictures!"

Dad had gone into the kitchen and returned with a cup of coffee for each of us. I allowed Mindy to steer me near the tree and took my spot beside Ava.

"Okay, nice smiles, come on," Mindy encouraged, holding up her camera.

I knew Dad had gotten her a new camera for Christmas, so she would undoubtedly want to take even more pictures after she opens it up.

The three of us posed for pictures for a few minutes until Mindy decided she wanted candid ones of us opening gifts.

"Here," Josh said, handing me a small box wrapped in red paper.

"From you?" I asked with a confused expression.

He nodded.

Leave it to Josh to make me feel like the worst brother ever. I hadn't gotten him or Ava anything for Christmas and I relied on splitting gifts with Josh for our parents.

"It's just a small thing. Don't worry about it," he said. He must have noticed the uncomfortable look of guilt on my face.

"He didn't get *me* anything," Ava said as she plopped a piece of chocolate from her stocking in her mouth.

"I didn't get you anything either," I admitted with a laugh.

"Maybe I should revoke your favorite brother status," Ava said with raised eyebrows.

"You wouldn't."

Ava rolled her eyes but didn't say anything else. She knew I was right.

I turned back to the small gift in my hand and ripped the paper off of it. The small white box was held shut by a single piece of tape. When I opened the box, I found a car key and then turned to give Josh a confused expression, holding the key up between my fingers.

"I didn't get you a car," Josh clarified. "I just had a spare key to ours made. So you can really take it whenever you need it."

I looked back at the key with a slight smile on my face. It was a small gift but it was a nice gesture.

"Thanks Josh," I said, leaning over to him to give him a brief hug.

He just smiled at me.

We finished opening presents and began getting ready to head over to Mindy's parents' house like the family did every year. I hadn't seen the two of them, or really anyone in Mindy's family, for at least five years.

When we got there, I was reminded of how lavish her family lived. Their house was huge and neatly kept. I couldn't help but feel under-dressed in my red and white flannel shirt and fitted khaki pants.

The entire family seemed to be there, cars lining the street and the foyer crowded with people as soon as we entered.

"Aunt Tracy popped out two more kids since last time you saw her," Josh whispered in my ear as I stood uncomfortably while Dad and Mindy greeted everyone around us.

"Really?" I asked, shocked. Last time I saw Mindy's sister, Tracy, she had at least five kids already.

He hummed in confirmation, nodding his head toward where she stood, a child who looked just over a year old on her hip.

"I'm gonna go see what kind of food they have around here," Ava announced, pushing through the crowd and going toward the kitchen.

I wished I was quick enough to follow her, but as soon as she left, Mindy's parents, Dorothy and Richard, had made their way to us.

"Joshua!" Dorothy greeted, giving him a big kiss on the cheek while Richard opted for a firm handshake.

"Hi Gram, Gramps," Josh said with a smile.

"And Elijah," Dorothy turned to me. "You have grown so much since I saw you last!" She gave me a hug tighter than I thought she would be capable of.

"It's good to see you Dorothy," I told her with a tight smile.

"Elijah," Richard greeted, holding his hand out for me to shake. He was a man of few words. The only time I ever saw him speak much was to my Dad. Those two got along well.

"Go eat! There is plenty of food!" Dorothy exclaimed before her and Richard went around to greet more of the giant family.

"Do you even know everybody here?" I whispered to Josh as he led me into the kitchen.

"Not really," he admitted with a shrug. "My grandparents invite their siblings and their families. I don't really know the extended family."

We found Ava, Dad, and Mindy in the kitchen snacking on some cinnamon buns and leaning up against the counter.

"You won't believe what I just found out," Mindy said as we approached them.

"What?" Josh and I asked at the same time.

"Tracy is pregnant."

" *Again?"* Josh asked incredulously.

Mindy nodded. "I told her she should get her tubes tied after this one. This is kid number eight!"

"I couldn't even imagine," Dad said, shaking his head. "We have our hands full with three."

"And it's mostly because of Ava," I joked, earning a kick in the shin from my little sister and laughs from the rest of my family.

Before anyone could say anything else, my phone started ringing. I pulled it from my pocket and groaned when I saw the caller ID.

"What?" Dad asked when he noticed my sour expression.

"It's Mom," I told him, turning the phone so he could see.

"Do you want me to answer it?" he asked.

"I should answer it," I said with a sigh. "At least let her say Merry Christmas."

"You're not obligated to," Dad reminded me.

"I know."

I walked over to a deserted corner in the kitchen and quickly answered the phone call before it went to my voicemail.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Elijah," Mom said, sounding surprised. "Merry Christmas."

"You too."

"It was strange without you here this morning," she told me in a soft tone. "I missed you."

I didn't say anything. There was nothing for me to say.

"You could still come to church with us," Mom suggested. "We already went this morning but there's a night mass."

"Mom, I can't. I have plans," I said with a sigh.

"Surely your father could give you up for the night," Mom urged. "He's had you all morning."

But he's never had me for a Christmas morning.

"He won't be okay with that," I told her. "I can't."

She was silent for a few moments. "I miss you."

I couldn't even make myself say it back.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," I said before hanging up and heading back over to my family.

Dad held his arm out to me, wrapping it around my shoulder once I was close enough.

"You okay?" he asked, holding me tightly to his side.

"I'm fine," I said with a nod.

"Want a sip of my mimosa?" Dad whispered with a grin.

"I heard that," Mindy said in a stern tone.

Dad waved her off. "A sip won't kill him."

I just laughed, enjoying their company and trying to push the thoughts of my mother out of my head.

***

Christmas had come and gone without another word from my mother, but my other tormentors were a different story and they were back in full force on the Lord's day.

Merry Christmas fag. only three more days until we see you

Did you really think Micah could save you?

See you at the tournament fag you better hope we don't catch you alone.

I thought they would have let up if Micah talked to them, but I was wrong.

"Thanks for coming with me, Elijah," Mindy said with a soft smile on her face as we drove down the road.

She had insisted on taking me out the day after Christmas. Apparently some painting place she went to with her friends was having some sort of deal and she wanted us to go together. I wasn't much of a painter, but Mindy was hard to say no to.

"Sure," I replied.

"I think you'll like it," she assured me. "Even if you're not a fan of painting."

I hummed in agreement, though I wasn't sure if she was right.

"I wanted to take you here because I think it'll help you out a bit," she told me, causing confusion to overtake me.

"Help me with what?"

Mindy smiled at me briefly then turned back to the road.

"When I was your age, I had really low self esteem," she began explaining. "I didn't really like myself, didn't think my friends liked me. I spent a lot of time alone."

The familiarity of her words caused a feeling of realization in me.

"When my mom finally had enough, she took me painting," Mindy continued. "The paintings were supposed to be a self portrait of how you see yourself, like what we're doing today."

"How you see yourself?"

She nodded. "So it doesn't have to be a realistic portrait, it can be anything as long as it reflects you."

Mindy pulled the car into a plaza. It was the same one that housed the grocery store, only the little paint studio was off to the side with barley any cars around it.

The two of us walked into the studio and Mindy talked to the lady at the front desk before we were directed to our stations, putting on aprons and getting all the supplies we needed.

Mindy started her painting with a soft expression while I just stared at a blank canvas.

"Don't know where to start?" Mindy asked when she noticed me doing nothing.

"No idea," I confessed.

"Pick a color," she instructed.

I picked blue, dabbing the brush into the paint.

"Now paint something blue that you think reflects you," she said, motioning toward my canvas.

I poorly painted what I wanted to look like a frozen lake, but it ended up just being a blue blob. I sent Mindy a dissatisfied look to which she chuckled, placing her paintbrush down.

"You don't get why I'm making you do this, do you?" she asked.

"Not really," I admitted.

"You and I are a lot alike," she told me. "We both have trouble seeing our worth."

She waited a few moments to continue.

"We need to confront the feelings we have about ourselves because if we don't, it'll eat us alive," she explained.

I nodded, thinking I finally understood what she was talking about.

My painting was in no way good, but it told me more about myself than I thought it would. I used dark colors, blues, grays, and blacks. Nothing on it really made sense. There was a section dedicated to hockey, one dedicated to my mom, one to my family, and another to my feelings about Fox.

"Wow," Mindy said, causing me to tear my eyes away from my painting. "It's dark."

"Yeah," I said with a sigh.

"But I sense some hopefulness," she said with a grin.

I chuckled. "Maybe."

I glanced over at hers and was almost blinded by the bright colors of yellow and pink. Mindy's was a lot better than mine, showing she obviously had practice with this before.

"Mine is about what I love," she told me. "What's yours about?"

I looked back to mine and stared for a moment.

"Everything that makes me feel something," I said.

"Good," Mindy said, placing her hand on my shoulder. "It's good to put your emotions somewhere so they don't just stay inside."

I couldn't believe it, but the time I spent with Mindy had actually made me feel better. I felt different, like I wasn't holding onto so much anymore. It was nice to have a mother figure that truly cared about me.

After a while, when our paintings were mostly dry, the two of us started our way home.

"You know," Mindy started as she pulled out of the parking lot. "I never really talk about this stuff with anyone else. My self esteem."

"Not even Dad?"

"Not really," she admitted. "Maybe I should. I'm really glad I got to share this experience with you."

"It was... nice." I couldn't think of the exact same word to describe it. Peaceful? Soothing?

"Hopefully we can do this more often," Mindy suggested. "Just us."

I smiled at her. "I'd like that."

We were silent for a few moments before Mindy spoke up again.

"I think you should tell Josh that what he said to you the night you left bothered you," she said, her voice soft yet strong. "I don't think you should just brush it off."

"Mindy, I want to just move on from it."

"I don't think you can until you do that," she replied. "You may think what he said was true but it still bothered you. You two should talk about that."

I didn't answer.

"And I'm not saying this to defend Josh, I'm saying this for you."

"Okay."

"You know, I love you Elijah," Mindy continued as we neared our home. "You're my son. I don't care what our DNA says."

I smiled at her. "I love you too."

When we got home, Mindy and I brought our paintings inside and I quickly put mine in my room. I plugged my phone into its charger before going into the bathroom to shower.

I couldn't help but think of the time I spent with Mindy and how it made me feel. It seemed like such a simple thing, but she was right; confronting my emotions was crucial in dealing with them. I always thought hockey was the only way I could let off steam. Never would I have thought of art to be a sort of therapy for me.

My shower was quick and soon enough, I dried and threw on my clothes before heading back to my room.

I was confused when I saw Josh standing in there until I saw what he was doing.

"What are you doing?" I asked Josh, rushing over to him and snatching my phone out of his hand.

"Elijah, what the hell is that?" he asked in a low tone, gesturing toward my phone.

"None of your business!" I yelled. "Don't go through my phone!"

"Are you getting bullied?" Josh questioned, his eyebrows raised.

"Leave it alone, Josh," I seethed.

"I can't!" he exclaimed. "I've been trying to give you space but I can't ignore that!"

"Why did you even go through my phone in the first place?" I snapped, shoving the phone in my back pocket.

"Because one of those idiots wrote something stupid on your post," Josh explained. "The one Ryan posted of all of us."

I hadn't even notice any of the guys from my old team comment on the photo.

"I wasn't going through your phone, just your Instagram," Josh said.

I scoffed. "That doesn't make it any better."

Josh stared at me with a hard glare. I could tell he was trying not to blow up at me, but if I pushed him far enough, he would.

"I could have just gone to Dad, would you have preferred that?" Josh asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

My glare matched his at his words.

"I'm trying to be a better brother to you, Elijah," Josh told me, his voice soft. "I can't let you torture yourself with what those people have to say to you. I can't."

"I'm not," I lied.

Josh gave me a look that told me he saw right through me.

"I know you," he said. "I know you think you deserve what those people say."

"Josh–"

"But you don't," he cut me off. "You don't deserve it." His voice broke on the last few words.

I couldn't pull words out of my mouth. My throat was dry and my eyes burned as I looked at Josh. He seemed so torn up and guilty. When I saw tears well up in his eyes, I knew this was about more than just the messages I had received.

"I'm *so sorry* ," Josh choked out, his jaw right.

I was shocked at the sound of his voice, broken and shaky.

"Josh let's just not do this right now," I suggested, wanting to get away from him as soon as possible.

"I'm not ignoring this," he asserted, his voice sounding stronger. "You can't let them do that to you."

"It's not like I can just stop it," I responded with a sigh.

"Block them! Delete the account. Do *something* ," Josh urged. " *Please* Elijah."

"It's not a big–"

"You're my brother. *I love you* . I can't let this happen to you." His voice was getting shaky again.

My mouth went dry at his words. I didn't remember a time Josh and I had ever uttered those words to each other We never saw ourselves as brothers, not until now at least.

My lip quivered as my eyes burned with tears that began spilling out. Josh had his arms wrapped around me almost instantly, letting me cry on his shoulder. He held me tightly, like I would unravel if he let go. I grasped the back of his shirt and rested my head on him.

"I'm so worried something will happen to you if that continues," Josh said in a raspy voice, his head falling to my shoulder.

"I'm sorry I worry you," I muttered.

"You're my brother, I'll always worry about you," he replied. "Worrying about you isn't a burden, it just comes with being family."

I gripped him tighter and let out an uneven breath.

"I love you too, Josh."

His arms secured me to him as we both calmed down.

"I couldn't ignore this," Josh started. "But I really am trying to stop butting into your life."

I scoffed, pulling away from him to give him a look of disbelief.

"It's not working," I told him.

"It is," he assured me with a grin. "I know more than you think, but I'm minding my business."

It wasn't hard to figure out what he was talking about.

I nodded, tightly pressing my lips together.

"But we'll talk about that when you're ready," he said, his grin turning into a satisfied smirk.

I laughed, wiping excess tears form under my eye.

"No we won't."

I could tell it pained him to not ask me about Fox, but still, he kept his word and kept his mouth shut.

The two of us moved to sit down on my bed, shoulder to shoulder. Josh held out an open hand, raising his eyebrows at me.

"Phone," he said.

I rolled my eyes, pulling my phone from my back pocket and handing it over to him. Josh wasted no time opening up my Instagram and blocking the members from my old team who had left me messages. He deleted the messages and put my account on private.

"You should block everyone from your old school," Josh suggested. "So they have no way of getting to you."

I nodded in agreement. Josh and so spent the next few minutes going through my followers and blocking everyone from my old school.

"There," Josh said with a grin, handing my phone back. "Now you can still get memes from Ryan without the assholes bullying you."

"Thanks Josh," I said in a soft tone.

Josh let out a hum and didn't make any move to leave my room.

"Josh," I started, grabbing his attention.

He turned to look at me. "Yeah?"

"What you said that night, the night I left," I continued. "It really bothered me. It still bothers me."

His expression softened and he looked down at his lap, avoiding eye contact.

"I know," he muttered.

"I'm not mad at you," I told him. "But it hurt."

Josh sighed, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"I was just scared and frustrated," he said. "And I took it out on you and that was fucked up."

"I know."

"And I thought you just hated being here," he continued. "But I now I know it's because you feel like you don't belong here, not because you hate us."

"Yeah..."

"You do belong here, you know," Josh told me, nudging me with his shoulder.

I thought for a moment. "I'm trying."

"I'm sorry for saying that stuff," Josh apologized. I could tell by the look on his face that he was sincere.

"I know you are," I agreed.

"I don't even know why I was so worried about you knowing about Trevor," Josh admitted with a sigh.

"It's not a big deal," I assured him. "I still think you should apologize to him."

Josh nodded. "Yeah. I should."

The hurt we both felt throughout the months I had been living here was out in the open, and now that it was, it could finally start to heal.

**

****PLEASE READ****

Early update! Just because I've been neglecting all my school work<3 and trying to outline the rest of this book so I can let you know how many chapters will be left (at this point I have no idea).

Thanks for reading! I know there was no Fox this chapter, but it was important for Elijah's character.

What did you think about Christmas and Josh's gift to Elijah? What about his bonding time with Mindy and what they talked about? Do you think that will help Elijah? I know some of you have been wanting someone to find out about the messages so what do you think about Josh finding them and what was said between him and Elijah? Do you think they're going to get closer?

Also, I posted a message earlier in the week but I wanted to post it here too since some of you might not have seen it. So I will post the exact message here: I wish I didn't have to say this because most of the people who comment on my stories are super nice and engaged readers but some people post hateful comments/fight with others in the comments.

If you post hateful comments/fight with people in the comments on my story and I see it I will delete it and mute you so you won't be able to comment on my story at all. I don't have time to go through all the comments and delete them all but if I do see it that's what's gonna happen. Obviously I'm not talking about people who are giving constructive criticism or are disagreeing with something in the book (as long as it's not hateful).I really appreciate all my readers and people who comment kind/constructive/engaged things, so please know that most of you do not fall under the few people I'm talking about.

I WOULD LIKE TO REITERATE: I am okay with criticism, disliking characters, disliking certain things about the plot, and having respectful debate with people in the comments. I am NOT okay with insulting, hateful, or degrading comments whether it be about my work or directed at another reader.

Like I said, I don't have time to go through every comment and delete the bad ones but if I do see something along those lines I *will* delete it and I *will* mute you without warning so you can't comment on my stories at all.

Also, like I said, this is just a few people but it has gotten a little out of hand. Most of you guys are nice and super engaged and I love reading your comments, so keep them coming!

Sorry for the long author's note. Thanks if you actually read it.

37

It was the day before the tournament and I had just finished packing my things when my phone started ringing. My mind filled with dread as I lifted it off of my nightstand, but I was pleasantly surprised when it was Fox that was calling and not my mother.

"Hey," I answered, sitting down on my bed.

"Come over," he replied.

My lips quirked up slightly. "Why?"

"Because," Fox said instantly.

"Why?"

He let out a long sigh. "You're going to make me say it?"

I laughed. "Say what?"

"I miss you..."

I felt my face flush at his words. I had to remind myself that we weren't actually together and that I needed to stop letting his words effect me. But it wasn't that easy.

"Okay," I said. "I'll come."

I could practically hear the smile in his tone. "See you soon?"

As soon as I hung up the phone, I headed to the shower. I was only in there for a few minutes before I dried off and got dressed. Leaving my room with my new car key, I bumped face first into Josh in the hallway.

"Why are you in such a rush?" he asked me, lifting an eyebrow as he studied my face.

"I'm gonna use the car," I said, holding up the key. "If you're not using it."

"Yeah, go ahead," Josh replied with a shrug.

I knew Josh was dying to ask me questions, even though he had made the promise to keep his mouth shut about it. To ensure he kept his promise, I turned away from him to walk down the stairs before he could say anything.

"Are you going to Fox's?" he asked as he followed me toward the stairs.

"Josh," I warned, looking at him with narrow eyes. "You said you were keeping your mouth shut."

"I know, I know," he agreed with a sigh, shoving his hand through his hair. "Are you though? That's all I want to know, I swear."

I showed him an unamused expression. "Yes. I'm going to Fox's."

"Okay," he replied. "Have fun."

I snickered at his words and his eyes widened.

"I mean, uh," Josh stuttered. "Not too much fun?"

"Josh."

"I mean— I mean." He let out a heavy breath. "I don't know what you guys do."

"I'm leaving now," I said, shaking my head at him.

After letting Dad know where I was headed, I left the house and started the journey toward Fox's place. Once I arrived, I parked on the road outside his house and made my way up to the front door. Fawn answered the door after I knocked with a distressed look on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked, taken back by her expression.

"There's a bit of an issue," she said. "Maybe you can calm Fox down."

"Calm him down?" I wondered, stepping into the house, my eyes darting around the room in search for Fox.

Fawn led me into the living room where I saw Fox's dad, Leo, and Robin holding Fox and Wren back from each other while Vanessa and Raven stood in the middle. Fox's face looked angrier than I had ever seen it. His jaw was tightly set, looking as if his teeth would break if he pressed them together any harder. His eyes were dark and formed into slits as he looked straight through his sister and mother over to Wren. I could see a slight bruise forming on his cheek.

"Fox?" I called out.

His gaze immediately turned to me, his eyes widening slightly as if he forgot I was going to be coming over. He shook himself out of Robin's grip and motioned for me to follow him up the stairs without a word.

I took a moment to look over at Wren. He had quite a few bruises forming on his face and his usual devious expression was gone. He looked more defeated and distant.

As I went up the stairs, I heard Leo begin to question Wren but I stopped paying attention as soon as I was in Fox's room where he was pacing the floor and pulling at his hair.

"What happened?" I asked in a curious tone, shutting the door behind me.

"He knows," Fox replied in a raspy tone. It didn't take much thought to figure out what he was talking about.

"Fox..."

He continued pacing around his room, not even looking over at me. I noticed blood on his knuckles as his fist closed on his hair.

"Hey," I called out, walking over to him and grabbing his hand from his hair. "You need to clean this."

"He *knows* ," Fox repeated, this time looking at me with a vulnerable expression. His eyes were wide with worry and a muscle in his jaw twitched as he tightened it.

"It's okay," I assured him.

"No it's not!" he snapped, ripping his hand from mine, gazing at me with an expression mixed with anger and fear. "He's gonna use it against me. He's gonna tell everyone!"

" *Fox* ," I said in an almost pleading tone, firmly grabbing onto his shoulders. "Calm down. You don't know that."

"You don't know him, Elijah!"

I didn't know him, but I could tell by the look on his face downstairs that telling his brother about what he knew hadn't gone as he had hoped.

"Fox, he's know for years," I started. "Don't you think he would have already done something if he was planning to?"

Fox looked at me with a skeptical expression. "How do you know that?"

"Know what?"

"That he's know for years," Fox answered.

It didn't occur to me that Wren hadn't told Fox that he had told me about his knowledge.

I sighed. "He told me."

"He told you?" he repeated back, stepping away from me. "When the hell have you had time to talk to my brother about me?"

I sent him an irritated look. "It's not like that and you know it. I saw him at the skating rink a few nights ago. He talked to me, not the other way around."

He scowled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because that's exactly what he wanted!" I exclaimed. "He wanted me to do his dirty work for him."

Fox let out a frustrated groan, holding his head in his hands.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked in a wary tone.

"I'm not mad, I'm just pissed off," he mumbled.

I looked at him in confusion. "Pretty sure those mean the same thing."

He looked up at me with a softened gaze, lowering his hands to his side.

"Not at you," he assured me.

I tried to hide my smile. Fox's lips twitched like he was trying to hide his own before he sighed and looked down at his bloody knuckles.

"I could use some help cleaning this," he uttered, looking up at me with wide eyes that were feigning innocence.

I playfully rolled my eyes but couldn't hide my smile any longer as I gripped his hand and let him lead me to the bathroom.

"Why did you punch him?" I asked as I cleaned his knuckles with a cloth and soft soap.

Fox shrugged. "He made me mad."

I shook my head at him, drying his hand and searching through the medicine cabinet for bandages. He leaned down and opened the door under the sink, pulling out a box and handing it to me. I wrapped a bandage around his knuckles and washed my hands.

"Are your parents going to punish you or something?" I asked once we were back in his room.

"I don't know," he admitted, lying down on his bed and pulling me on top of him.

We stayed in that position for a while, my head resting on Fox's chest while he ran his uninjured hand through my hair. He left a long kiss on the top of my head before letting out a deep sigh. I moved my head slightly, trying to look up at him.

"Hey," I said, grabbing his attention.

"Hm?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, I sat up and straddled his waist, causing him to shoot me a look of confusion. I leaned down and kissed his neck, feeling his body relax at the way my lips moved over his skin.

"Elijah..."

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked against his skin.

"Not particularly."

I answered him by continuing to kiss his neck, moving up to his jaw. He let me kiss him for a few more moments before he grabbed my head in his hands and forced me to look at him.

"I thought you said you weren't okay with distractions," he commented, lifting his eyebrows in question.

He was right, but at that moment, I couldn't find it in me to care.

"Do you want me to distract you?" I asked, studying his face as he pondered on the question. "Because I want to."

He took a deep breath, the dilemma in his mind evident by the look on his face. Instead of answering, he pulled my face down to his and grabbed my

lips in a kiss. We remained in sync, in a quick rhythm before I detached my lips from his and kissed down his jaw and his neck.

My hands moved down to the waistline of his jeans and fumbled with the button. His breath hitched as I undid his jeans and pulled them down his legs.

"Elijah," Fox called out, causing me to look up at him. "Are you sure?"

"If you're sure."

"Okay."

That was all he had to say for me to continue, pulling his boxers off and putting my head between his thighs in my efforts to distract him.

***

Fox and I were both in considerably better moods after our *distraction* earlier, him returning the favor. The two of us were lying on his bed when a knock sounded at his door.

"Who is it?" Fox snapped in annoyance. I lightly smacked his chest and sat up.

"Me," Ian's voice called out. "I saw Elijah's car here and I definitely didn't want to walk in on *that.* "

Fox sat up and told Ian to come in the room. Ian came inside, his hockey bag and a duffel bag slung over each shoulder as he held onto his hockey stick.

"You staying the night?" Fox asked, motioning toward his bags.

"Yeah," Ian replied with a sigh, dropping his bags onto the floor. He looked exhausted, his eyes dim and his stature stiff.

Fox and I shared a look as Ian sat himself down at Fox's desk, flipping the lamp on.

"You mind if I borrow some money for the hotel?" Ian suddenly asked. "I gave Coach most of it already but my fucking mom took the rest I needed."

Fox looked as if he was surprised. I figured it was because he didn't expect Ian to talk about this with me here rather than being shocked at what he told him.

"Yeah, no problem," Fox assured him.

"I'll pay you back," Ian promised, not even looking at him.

"I know, don't stress about it."

Ian let out a groan, throwing his head back in annoyance. "I've been fighting with her all fucking day about it. I couldn't be around her any longer."

"Why did she take it?" Fox asked, leaning back against his headboard.

"Hell if I know," he replied. "I don't mind helping out when she asks but when she just helps herself to my tip money, it pisses me off."

"That would piss me off too," Fox agreed.

Ian finally looked over at the two of us sitting side by side on his bed. He gave us a knowing look and I swore I saw his lips quirk up for a moment.

"Why is your hand taped?" Ian asked, pointing to Fox's bandage.

Fox looked down at his hand. "I punched Wren in the face. Repeatedly."

Ian snorted, shaking his head. "What'd he do to piss you off?"

"Told me he knows I'm gay."

Ian laughed and I was glad that he was seeming to be perking up.

"No offense, dude, but you're not good at hiding it," Ian told him. "Especially when you're around him." He pointed toward me.

I couldn't help but chuckle at his words, causing Fox to glance at me in irritation.

"Both of you, shut up," Fox snapped.

Before either of us could reply there was another knock on Fox's door, causing him to let out a loud groan.

"It's Claudia," Claudia announced through the door.

"Fine," Fox said, causing her to open the door and step in, closing it behind her. She held a small wrapped box in her hand.

"What, are you guys having a party or something?" she joked, throwing herself down on the bed in front of us.

"Yes, that's exactly what we're doing," Fox sarcastically responded.

As the two of them bantered, my eyes lingered to the place on Fox's wall where he had hung pictures of him and his friends. I dwelled on the photo of him and Claudia for longer than I should have before noticing a new picture pinned there. It was the photo of all of us at the Bruins game on my birthday. I smiled at the memory, feeling some of the happiness I felt on that day.

"Fox, open it!" Claudia exclaimed, pulling my attention back to the two of them.

"I didn't get you anything," he groaned.

"It's fine!" she said. "I wasn't planning on getting you anything either but I saw this when I was shopping and I just had to get it for you."

"Open it," I encouraged him, nudging him with my elbow.

Fox let out a long sigh and took the box from Claudia. He tore the paper off and opened the box to reveal a signed picture of one of the Bruins players.

"Oh, sick," Fox said, taking the frame out of the box. "I was at this game."

"I know, duh," Claudia said. "That's why I got it."

Fox smiled at her. "Thanks, Claud."

"So..." Claudia trailed, looking between Fox and me, then over to Ian. "How's everyone doing?"

Fox rolled his eyes. "You're nosy."

"I'm just asking how you're doing!"

"But I know what you're *really* asking and it's none of your business."

"You'll tell Ian but you won't tell me?" she accused.

Ian shook his head. "He doesn't tell me anything."

The four of us talked for a while before I got a text from my dad, asking me to come home. I didn't blame him for not wanting me to stay out too late, and I had to bring the car back home anyway.

Fox followed me out of his room and down the steps, insisting on walking me out to my car.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, getting into my car and putting the window down.

Fox leaned in my window. His eyes darted up to the house and then back to me before quickly pecking me on the cheek. A smile broke out onto my face as he leaned back.

"Goodnight. Be careful," he said, stepping away from the car so I could drive away.

When I got home, I was greeted by Dad and Mindy in the living room.

"Have a good day?" Dad asked, turning the volume down on the TV.

My cheeks burned slightly as I thought about what I had done today.

"Yeah, it was good," I told him.

"Are you all packed for the tournament?" he asked to which I nodded.

"I really wish we could go see you guys play," Mindy added with a disappointed look on her face. Neither of them were able get the time off work to make the journey to Maine for the tournament.

"Yeah, I wish you could too," I truthfully replied. As my family was getting closer, the more I enjoyed spending time with them.

Dad looked troubled, like he was itching to say something but not sure if he should.

"I need you to be really careful," he said after a few moments of silence. "Your old team will be there and I don't want them messing with you."

I didn't want that either, but I knew they had planned to.

"I'll stay with the guys, don't worry," I assured him.

Dad nodded, looking slightly less worried than before.

There was a feeling I couldn't shake, my insides trembling while my mind tried to convince them to be still.

**

Hi everyone! Another early update while I take a break from my schoolwork.

What did you think about Fox finding out Wren knows his secret? And Fox and Elijah's moment? What about Ian and Claudia coming in? Any predictions for what's going to go on at the tournament next chapter?

Also, my finals start today and go into next week, so there may not be an update next week. I will let you know through my message board if there is no update next week.

Thanks for reading!

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The early morning darkness made me want to crawl back into bed and hide under the covers. Coach Silva had made it clear to the team that the bus would be leaving at six AM and no later. We had a seven hour drive ahead of us, so we had to get on the road early.

"Elijah, you awake?" Dad asked through my closed door.

I opened the door to see him standing there with a tired expression.

"I'm going to drive you and Josh so you don't have to leave the car at the school for three days," he explained with a yawn.

I nodded and followed him down the stairs to the kitchen where he had prepared some eggs and toast for Josh and me.

"I packed you guys some snacks too," Dad told me.

"Thanks Dad."

Josh pattered down three steps and into the kitchen to meet us. His hair was a mess and he had tired bags under his eyes but I was sure I didn't look much better.

After eating and grabbing our things, we went out to the car and Dad drove us to the school where the bus was already waiting.

"Bye boys. Good luck," Dad said as we gathered our things. "I love you guys."

"Love you," Josh and I said in unison as we began to make our way to the bus.

"Elijah," Dad called out, causing me to turn back to him.

"Yeah?"

"If anything happens, call me," he said. "Call me whenever you need to. Or want to."

I nodded. "I will."

We said one last goodbye before Dad pulled away and I made my way over to the bus where most of the team was already sitting. Fox stood outside the bus with the coaches but his eyes were glued to me when he saw me approaching.

"Good morning," Coach Silva greeted. "You can put your gear in here and go take a seat."

I threw my bags into the storage compartment of the bus, making sure to grab a water and a snack before entering the bus to find a seat. Most of the guys were already sleeping, Josh included. The team had rented a coach bus since the ride was going to be so long, so most people were sitting alone since there were enough seats.

Once the last of the guys arrived, Fox finally got on the bus. He made his way to where I sat, sitting in the seat beside me. I noticed I had left a few marks on his neck from the day before, but I didn't mention it to him.

"Surprised you don't want to sit alone," I teased, remembering the last time we had taken a bus and sat together.

"It's cold on here, I need your body heat," he said with a close lipped smile.

"Is that so?"

"I could sit somewhere else, if you're gonna annoy me for seven hours," Fox replied.

"Hm, you can stay," I told him, scooting slightly closer.

"That's what I thought," he said, bringing his body closer to mine.

"How's your hand?" I asked him, looking down to where his injured hand rested on his leg.

"It's fine," he mumbled, sounding as if he was annoyed I even asked.

"You're cranky when you're tired," I pointed out, causing him to shoot me a glare.

It didn't take long for the entire team to fall asleep. My head was resting against my small backpack that I had put up against the window. The bus was cold, but next to Fox, my body was warm.

It must have been hours before I woke up, cracking open my eyes to see the sun had risen and the bus was stopped in a parking lot. I lifted my head slightly and that was when I realized Fox's head was nuzzled into my neck, his warm breath hitting my skin.

"Boys, let's go!" Coach Silva exclaimed, causing Fox's head to pick up and look around as if he had forgotten where he was.

Luckily, the two of us were in the last row of seats and the rest of the team had been asleep, so we weren't spotted in our close position. The bus had stopped at a rest area and when I checked the time, I realized we had been driving for four hours already.

Fox and I followed the rest of the team off the bus and into the rest area. We entered into a food court, some of the team already lining up while others headed straight for the bathroom.

"Are you hungry?" Fox asked in a raspy tone, arching his back in a stretch.

"Not really," I admitted. "But I probably will be later."

"Might as well get something then," he said, nudging me with his elbow and motioning for me to follow him.

I remembered Dad had given me some snacks, but I wanted to save most of those for the hotel.

Fox and I got in line at some fast food place and got breakfast sandwiches before heading over to a table where our friends sat. Alex was in the middle of telling the group how he was getting ready to ask this girl Beth out. None of the guys looked like they believed him.

"I swear I am!" Alex insisted, taking a bite of his veggie burger.

"You've been saying this for months," Ryan pointed out.

"No, I've been talking about getting with her for months, which I already did," Alex replied.

"So what's the point in asking her out?" Jude asked in a confused tone. "If you've already had sex with her?"

"Oh my God," Josh said, shaking his head. "Did you seriously just ask that?"

Alex shot Jude a glare. "Because I *like* her."

"Jude just doesn't know what it's like to get a girl," Liam joked, earning an eye roll from Jude.

"I know better than you do," Jude shot back,

The guys exchanged more banter that I really didn't pay attention to until they brought Fox into their conversation.

"Fox, what about you? Getting back with Claudia?" Liam wondered, everyone's attention turning to Fox.

He gave them all a strange look, shaking his head. "No."

"Looks like you're getting with someone," Liam teased, gesturing toward his neck and causing a chorus of laughs from the guys. All Fox had to do was glare at them and they stopped.

"Doesn't she have a girlfriend now?" Ryan asked the group.

"Holly," I answered, a squeamish feeling travelling through my stomach at the thought of Fox going back to Claudia.

"Right, I knew that," Ryan said.

"Oh, Elijah, this reminds me," Alex said, looking straight at me. "Have you fucked Trevor yet?"

This earned him glares from Fox, Ian, Josh, and me.

"Will you shut up about that?" Ian snapped.

"I just want to know!" Alex defended himself, holding his hands in front of him. "I ship it!"

"What the hell does that even mean?" Fox spat in a harsh tone.

I placed my hand on Fox's leg under the table. I didn't know what had possessed me to do it, but he seemed to relax at my touch.

"It means I like them as a couple and want them to be together," Alex explained, seemingly not noticing Fox's agitation.

"It doesn't matter how many times you ask me that," I told him. "It's never gonna happen."

I couldn't tell if I said that more to convince Alex or to reassure Fox.

Luckily, the conversation shifted and after finishing our meals and going to the bathroom, we were ushered back onto the bus. Once the coaches accounted for everyone, the journey started again. When we were on the road, I plucked my headphones out of my bag and plugged them into my phone.

"Wanna listen?" I asked Fox, offering him one of the earbuds.

He nodded, his lips quirking up slightly as he took it from my hand and placed it in his ear. I shuffled one of my many playlists and Fox let out a scoff as *Cruel Summer* by Taylor Swift blasted into our ears.

"What?" I asked.

"You have the same taste in music as my fourteen year old sister," he said with a deadpanned look.

"You cannot possibly judge that after hearing one song," I told him, squinting my eyes in annoyance. "Admit it, you think it's catchy."

"I will not."

I chuckled, leaning back on the headrest.

Fox continued to complain about my music taste, but never moved to take out the earbud. I even caught him bobbing his head to a song he swore was stupid.

"Why is it called *Sunflower, Vol. 6* ?" Fox asked, pointing at my phone screen. "Where are one through five?"

"How am I supposed to know that?"

It didn't seem like it had been three hours since we stopped, but apparently it had since a few moments later we were pulling up to a hotel that was just across the street from the rink we would be competing at tomorrow.

"Listen up!" Coach Silva demanded, standing at the front of the bus. "I have to check us in, I will give you your room assignments and then you can have some free time until dinner at six PM."

There was a chorus of cheers from the guys at the mention of free time. Any time we didn't have to be on a strict schedule, we were happy. We all filed out of the bus into the cold northern Maine air. I was beginning to regret not bringing a heavier jacket.

I followed closely behind Fox after getting our things from the storage compartment, hurrying into the warmth of the hotel. After Coach had gotten our keys, he announced the room assignments which were the same as our last trip.

"I get the window bed," Josh said as he and Ian walked ahead of Fox and me.

"Josh, I swear to—" Ian's threat was cut short.

"Why don't you guys just share?" Fox asked in a bored tone.

My eyes widened at what that meant, that *we* would be sharing a bed. It wasn't like both Josh and Ian didn't know about the two of us, but it was still so strange and new.

Josh and Ian both turned to give Fox shocked expressions, the two of them obviously not knowing that they had the same knowledge about the two of us. Well, Ian clearly knew more.

Fox moved ahead of them as we got to our room, opening the door and letting us all in. He and I put our things by our bed while Josh and Ian fought about who got the side of the bed closer to the window.

"We're here for two nights, switch off dumbasses," Fox snapped, throwing himself down on the bed. "If it's actually that important. I don't understand the fucking obsession with the window."

I chuckled and sat beside him on the bed while Josh and Ian eyed us from the other side of the room. It was like there was a challenge to see who was going to address the elephant in the room first.

"You two have a staring problem?" Fox asked, raising an eyebrow. They both continued staring, only Ian's face turned into a sneer.

After a few more moments, they sat on their bed and we decided to watch TV until there was a loud knock on the door.

"Open up!" Ryan's voice called out.

I got up to open the door for him, revealing him, Alex, Jude, and Liam.

"Get ready and let's go!" Ryan commanded.

"Go where?" I asked.

I let the four of them into the room and they stood in front of the beds.

"There's a frozen lake not too far from here," Ryan explained. "We're going skating."

"We're going to be skating the whole time we're here and that's what you want to do with our free time?" Ian questioned.

"The whole team is going," Ryan said. "Most of them are already there."

Eventually, Ryan convinced us and we had grabbed our skates and followed him them out of the hotel. He wasn't kidding when he said it was near by. We just had to walk a little ways through the woods behind the hotel to make it to the beautifully frozen lake, surrounded by trees with a view of mountains in the background.

"Wow," I commented in awe.

"Well, it's definitely not just some stupid pond," Fox said from beside me.

"Definitely not."

The trees were decorated by the snow and the frozen lake looked blue from the reflection of the sky. The mountains in the background added to its picturesque look. There were already guys from the team, and some others, skating around.

"The ice looks good," Josh remarked.

He was right. It looked smooth and void of imperfections.

We all dropped our shoes off near our teammates' and shoved our skates onto our feet before gliding out onto the ice.

"We should play chicken," Ian suggested.

"No," Fox immediately denied. "If any of you idiots get hurt out here, that's on me, so keep the injuries to a minimum."

"You just don't want us to beat you again," I teased, a grin taking over my face.

"I can assure you, that's not it."

"Sore loser," I playfully muttered, skating away from him.

I skated closer to the middle of the ice, away from the others, gazing ahead as the sky turned from blue to pink as the sun began to set.

"I am a sore loser," Fox said from behind me.

I turned to look at him, giving him a coy smile. "I know you are."

Fox just stared at me with an unreadable expression. The sunlight illuminating his face made him look like he was glowing.

I spun around once and laughed as I turned my gaze back to the sky.

"Doesn't this look so cool?" I asked him.

"Yeah, it's cool," Fox agreed, clearing his throat.

I had to force myself to keep my eyes off of him. He always looked good, but this lighting against his skin was driving me insane.

I slowly skated backwards, moving away from him when suddenly an out of breath Alex came up to us.

"One of you race me," Alex commanded, leaning over with his hands on his knees.

"You look like you're about to fall over," I pointed out.

"Yet he'd still beat you in a race," Fox retorted.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I'm *not* slow."

"Both of you race me then!" Alex said, grabbing onto our wrists and pulling us along.

Alex led us over to the rest of the group and told Ryan to go stand at the 'finish line' while we lined up, getting ready.

On Josh's command, we pushed off and started our way toward Ryan. I pumped my legs as fast as I could, determined to catch up to Fox. I easily passed Alex, though he had already been tired so it wasn't that hard. Fox was only a few feet ahead of me as I reached out, grabbing onto the back of his sweatshirt. He cursed at me, trying to shove me off, but I wouldn't budge.

My grip on him tightened as I tried pulling him backward but he had still made it to Ryan with me behind him.

"You fucking cheater!" Fox exclaimed, spinning around to face me.

I laughed at him. The cold air had turned his cheeks and the tip of his nose pink, making him look absolutely adorable and impossible to take seriously.

"You won anyway," I told him.

"I want a rematch," he challenged.

"Why? You won!"

He didn't say anything, and instead, motioned for me to follow him back to the other guys. Alex decided to sit our next race out.

"You better keep your hands to yourself," Fox warned, pointing his finger at me.

I exaggeratedly sighed. " *Fine* ."

Josh counted us off again and the two of us set off.

Fox was faster than me. I knew it, he knew it, everyone knew it. He was probably the fastest guy on the team. But that didn't make me any less determined to beat him, even though the view from behind him was impeccable.

In my pursuit of beating him in this race, I had moved too quickly and slipped, sending myself flying forward. I slid on my stomach as Fox made it all the way to Ryan. I was met with laughs coming from the team. I couldn't keep myself from chuckling as I continued sliding.

Fox turned and instantly laughed at my position, placing his hand on his chest as he started skating toward me. I flipped myself over, lying on my back as Fox leaned over me.

"Are you okay?" he asked, chuckles between his words.

"I would've won," I said which just caused him to laugh harder, holding a hand out to me which I gladly took.

"Sure you would've," he sarcastically replied as he heaved me off the ice. He held onto my hand for longer than he should have, but my hand turned to ice as soon as he let go.

Fox's mouth closed but his lips quirked up as he motioned for me to follow him away from the crowd as they decided who would be the next to race. We skated side by side and I felt the heat of his gaze on my face.

"Hey," he said, stopping me. I turned to face him, lifting my eyebrows in question.

Fox let out a breath, a cloud forming between us before disappearing almost as soon as it came. He moved closer to me and I stayed put, my mind turning blank as I stared at his rosy face. He was closer than he should have been.

"Would it be bad if I kissed you right now?" Fox asked in a hushed tone.

My breath hitched in my throat and it seemed as if the world had stopped around us.

"Everyone would see," I reminded him. I didn't want him doing this if he wasn't ready. I didn't want to be something he regretted.

He nodded. "I know."

I let out a shaky breath.

"Would it be bad?" he repeated.

"If you're not ready for it," I answered. "If it would make you hate me."

"It won't."

"But are you ready for it?"

He paused for a moment, his eyes searching mine, before nodding.

"I am. I want to," Fox assured me.

"Then it wouldn't be bad."

That was all it took for him to cup my face in his cold hands, his lips caressing mine apprehensively. He had never kissed me softer than this. It was like he was assuring me, pouring happiness into me as his life changed drastically at this moment. His kiss warmed my skin, making me forget about the bitter cold around us. I felt the warmth in my bones.

He pulled away for a moment and looked in my eyes. I was worried I would see panic, but instead I saw comfortable determination. He pressed his lips back on mine, neither of us daring to look back at the faces that were surely staring at us.

I kissed him back harder, giving him back some of the reassurance he had given me and letting him know he was safe with me.

We pulled away again. His lips were slightly swollen and his body was rigid as he kept his back facing the rest of the team. I took the first look at them so he wouldn't have to. I glanced over his shoulder and the sight was comical to say the least.

Everyone on the team, except for Josh and Ian, had stopped what they were doing and froze in place, their mouths hung open and eyes bugging out of their heads.

I patted Fox on the shoulder and gave him a tight lipped smile.

"You have to face them," I said in a soft tone.

"I think I'll just stay here," he said.

"No."

He sighed, but ultimately turned around and shot a glare at our teammates.

"What?" Fox snapped, grabbing onto my hand and leading me back toward the group.

I could tell he was tense as his grip on my hand tightened. Considering his attitude at the moment, I was glad that he wasn't running from me in regret.

"Uh..." Alex stuttered, his eyes glued to our intertwined hands.

"What Alex?" Fox snapped again.

Alex's eyes shot up to Fox's face. "N-nothing, I'm just—"

"Just what?"

"Surprised?"

Fox's stare was unamused as he glanced at the rest of the group.

"We just didn't expect that," Ryan interjected in an even tone.

"Okay," Fox said with a shrug. He started leading me off the ice, telling the rest of the team it was time to get back to the hotel for dinner.

"Are you okay?" I asked him as we exchanged our skates for our shoes.

"I'm fine," he assured me, kissing my forehead as he stood. I grabbed onto his hand, noticing the scabbing on his knuckles.

We walked hand in hand back to the hotel, the rest of the team following behind us and undoubtedly whispering behind our backs. Once we entered the hotel, I saw the group of people I was dreading. Micah was the first to see me and his eyes widened at my hand in Fox's as he rushed over to us.

"Can I talk to you?" Micah rushed out, looking over his shoulder to ensure that no one was watching.

"Back off," Fox spat, releasing my hand to give him a shove.

"It's really important," Micah pleaded.

"No—"

"What?" I asked, stepping off to the side with him, Fox glaring at both of us.

Our team stopped and crowded around us as if they were ready to pounce on Micah if he stepped out of line.

"You guys can go," I told them. None of them moved.

"I'm not leaving you down here alone with them so you can scrap that idea," Fox asserted in a stern tone.

"You can stay," I replied.

Fox paused for a few moments before nodding and telling the others to leave. Some of them still lingered a little ways away but they were far enough where they wouldn't be able to hear.

"What is it Micah?" I asked once it was just the three of us.

He looked worried and stressed out. I couldn't tell if it was because of Fox giving him a death glare or if it was what he had to tell me.

"Dave is co-coaching our team," Micah said in a hushed tone.

" *What* ?"

"Coach Adams's wife just had a baby so the school is giving him time off," Micah explained, referencing my old assistant coach. "Dave said he wanted the job so they just gave it to him."

The rapid beating of my heart intensified as I thought about having to see Dave here.

"No, we're getting him out of here right now," Fox boomed angrily.

"That's not the worst of it," Micah told us, a guilt-ridden expression on his face.

I held my breath as he continued.

"Your mother is chaperoning," he added. "And the team— they—"

"This is ridiculous," Fox cut him off.

I held my hand up to Fox to stop him. "What about the team?"

"They're mad I defended you when I told them to stop with the messages," Micah said. "Not all of them are, but Landon and his guys, they're angry."

"What messages?" Fox interjected, turning his sharp gaze to me. "What—"

"I'll tell you later, Fox," I rushed out in a breathless tone.

"I don't know if they're going to try something on you, Elijah," Micah warned. "Just be careful."

He gave Fox and I one last look before he disappeared around the corner and back to his team.

Fox didn't say anything as he grabbed my hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the back of it and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

It seemed like I could never escape. My past I worked so hard to forget was always haunting me, hiding away in the shadows until it found the perfect opportunity to strike and leave me defenseless.

**

Thanks for reading!

I was going to hold off on this because I don't have the next chapter written yet and I usually like to have at least two ready to go, but my finals end TODAY so hopefully I'll have more time next week. Also, it's early AGAIN because I'm going back to work full time tomorrow so I won't have time to post tomorrow.

Anyways, what did you think of the chapter? The bus ride and stop with the team? What about getting to the hotel and going skating on the lake?

AND MOST IMPORTANTLY THE KISS ON THE LAKE? Did you expect that? What do you think that means for their relationship?

What about Micah warning Elijah?

Let me know!

39

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Josh and Ian were standing by the elevator when Fox and I finally walked away from Micah. Fox's hand was tightly clasped in mine, his expression tense as he slammed the button for the elevator. We only had a few minutes to go upstairs and put our skates away before we had to be at dinner, but just the elevator ride felt like an eternity.

"What did that asshole want?" Ian asked as the four of us stepped into the elevator.

I debated on telling them, mostly because of Josh. Once he found out about everything Micah said, he wouldn't leave me alone. However, I knew I had to call my dad, and I wouldn't put it past him to make the seven hour drive all the way up here.

"Let's just get to the room," I muttered, Fox slamming the button to our floor.

We were quiet as we made our way back to the hotel room, but once the four of us were inside and the door was shut, Josh turned to me with a stern expression.

"What's going on?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

I sighed, sitting down at the end of the bed as Fox leaned against the wall and looked down at me.

"I have to call Dad," I told him, fishing my phone out of my pocket.

Josh sat down beside me with a look of worry.

"What's going on?" he repeated more urgently this time.

"Dave and my mom are here," I admitted, looking down at my phone.

There was no use keeping it from Josh. He would find out once he saw them and it would be better if I gave him a heads up.

"Shit, Elijah," Josh cursed, letting out a heavy breath.

"Is that bad?" Ian wondered in a confused tone.

"Yes, it's bad," Fox snapped.

Ian gave him a look. "Chill."

I ignored them, dialing the phone for my Dad. He picked up right away which was quite on brand for him.

"Hey, is everything alright?" Dad asked.

"Mom and Dave are here," I told him.

"At the tournament?"

"Yes."

He was silent for a few moments as if he was trying to register what I had just said.

"I can take a few sick days," he finally said. "I'll take some sick days and go up there."

"You don't have to do that," I said with a sigh.

It wasn't like I felt as if I was in danger with them being here. It was uncomfortable and I didn't want to have to see either of them, but I doubted Dave would be punching me with so many people around.

"It's fine, Dad, really," I assured him. "I'll stick with Josh. We might not even have to play them."

"I'm going to call your coach," Dad said in an even tone. "I'll let him know the situation."

"Okay."

"I love you, Elijah," he said. "Call me tomorrow, okay?"

"I will," I replied. "I love you too."

Once I hung up I noticed all eyes were on me, and I couldn't keep mine from drifting over to Fox. He stood against the wall, his eyes filled with concern and his hands in fists.

"We should head down to dinner," I told the guys, standing up from the bed.

Fox groaned and heaved himself away from the wall. "I don't want to."

Ian snickered at him. "You just don't want to see the guys after you made out with Ellis in front of everyone."

I scoffed as Josh stood up beside me. "We didn't *make out* ."

"I wasn't watching when it started," Ian admitted as we left the hotel room, Fox sneaking his hand into mine. "But Alex was like 'Oh my God, they're making out!'" Ian did a high pitched voice to mimic Alex, placing his hands on his cheeks.

"Ryan was pretty much the only one not shocked," Josh said as we went back into the elevator.

Fox scoffed as the doors shut. "That's because Ryan is the only smart one. To be honest Josh, it took you *way* too long to put two and two together. Are you sure you're alright in the head?"

Josh let out a humorless chuckle, flipping Fox off in the process.

"Sorry, I get yelled at every time I ask anything about Elijah's life," Josh said with a pointed look directed at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him and gave him an exasperated look. "You do more than just ask. You get into my business because you're nosy."

Once we got out of the elevator, we made our way to where dinner was being held. The entire team was already there, including the coaches. Coach Silva was on the phone in the corner of the room, looking straight at me as he spoke. Dad really didn't waste any time.

Coach Silva pointed at me then motioned with his finger for me to go to him. I sighed, letting go of Fox's hand.

"I have to go talk to Coach," I told him in a low tone, walking past the stares we received at the table.

Coach finished saying something and then hung up the phone as I stopped in front of him.

"I just got off the phone with your dad," he told me, causing me to nod. "He let me know about your mother and her husband. I'll do what I can to keep them away from you."

"Thanks coach," I replied.

He just nodded and motioned toward the table filled with the team.

"Go eat," he said. "Let's not stress too much about it."

Fox watched my every move as I went back to the table, getting food from the buffet, before sitting down next to him. There was an awkward silence among the team as they stared us down.

"I'm going to punch you all in the throat if you don't stop looking at me," Fox threatened, causing most of the guys to look down at their plates.

Alex kept his gaze on us. "So..."

"Don't," Fox warned.

"You're not going to explain what's going on?" Alex asked with an incredulous look.

"Not our business," Ryan interjected as he took a sip of water.

"Thank you, Ryan," Fox said, his glare hard on Alex.

"Stop looking at me like you want to kill me," Alex responded with a wide eyed expression.

"I do want to kill you."

Alex huffed, crossing his arms over his chest as he almost incoherently mumbled, "I ship it."

"What the fuck did you just say?" Fox snapped.

"I said I ship it!" Alex exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air and gaining the attention of the rest of the table.

My lips quirked up in a grin as I glanced at Alex's exasperated expression. He and Fox continued giving each other looks before Alex changed his gaze over to me.

"So I guess this is why you never got with Trevor," he said with a look of realization.

"Alex—" Fox started with a sneer.

"Fox, stop it," I interjected with a stern expression, causing him to stop and lean back in his seat.

There were snickers among the guys, Jude letting out a subtle, "Whipped," that was masked by a cough.

"So," Jude started, looking between the two of us with an amused expression.

"Don't start," Fox grumbled, taking a bite of his food.

"Hey, you don't get to be mad at us when you were hiding that you're dating Ellis," Jude argued, holding his hands out in front of him.

"We're not dating," Fox immediately shot back with a scowl before slowly turning to me with a softened expression and asking, "Are we dating?"

Laughs rumbled out from the team, causing Fox's expression to sour again, his eyebrows knitting together in annoyance. I couldn't help but chuckle at him, hiding my smile with the back of my hand.

"Oh my God, how did I not see this sooner?" Alex laughed out, his hands over his face. "You're so whipped!"

"Shut your mouth," Fox spat, pointing a finger at Alex.

"You're all just oblivious," Ian said with a long eye roll.

"How come I didn't know you knew?" Josh asked him with a puzzled expression, an eyebrow lifting higher.

Ian shrugged. "I didn't know you knew."

"You both knew?" Alex dramatically gasped.

"Like I said," Ian started. "You're oblivious."

A look of realization spread over Fox's face, his eyes going round as he looked over toward the coaches then back to the team.

"Hey," Fox said in a low tone. "Don't let the coaches find out until we're home."

Jude sent him a look of confusion. "Why?"

"Because if they find out they'll take me out of Elijah's room."

I hadn't thought of that being a possibility, so I was glad Fox had.

"It's not like you two are going to have sex with his brother in the room," Jude commented.

Ryan shook his head before turning to Fox. "We won't say anything," he promised. "You guys up for hitting the pool tonight?"

And with that, conversation seemed to go back to normal.

***

"We don't have to go to the pool if you don't want to," Fox said as the two of us walked down the hall toward the elevator. Josh and Ian had already gone down with the guys. Fox decided to take his sweet time getting ready and I had just woken up from a nap, so the other two were sick of waiting for us.

"Are you sure you want to go?" I asked him, quirking my head to the side as the doors closed us in.

He sighed, staring straight ahead at our reflections in the metal doors. I felt my heart slowly sinking as I waited for his response.

"I just don't want them to treat me different," he mumbled, biting down on his bottom lip.

Before I could say anything, the elevator doors opened and Fox walked out. I followed closely behind him as he headed toward the pool, the smell of chlorine overtaking the air around us. Shouts and splashes from the guys could be heard as we walked down the hall and into the pool area.

We were quickly greeted by the rest of the team when they saw us enter. I followed Fox over to one of the tables where we put our stuff down, Fox pulling his shirt over his head and throwing it down on one of the chairs.

"Elijah, come play chicken!" Alex shouted from the pool, splashing water and hitting Ian in the face with it. Ian's expression soured and he wrapped an arm around Alex's neck, pulling him under the water.

"Don't drown him," Fox warned as he walked over to the pool. "We're gonna need him tomorrow."

Ian let Alex up, earning a shove from him. I slid into the pool after taking my shirt off, Fox following behind me.

"I don't want to play chicken," I told Alex. I was met with a pout and a splash of water sent to my chest.

"Anyway, are we ever going to get the story about how you two got together?" Alex asked, leaning against the side of the pool while Fox was talking to Ian.

I didn't know how much Fox was willing to tell. He was freshly out of the closet and I didn't want to upset him by spilling details he didn't want coming out.

"It's a long story," I said with a shrug, catching Fox's attention.

"What is?" he asked, looking between Alex and me.

"How you two got together!" Alex exclaimed, gaining the attention of the guys around us.

Fox's eyes swept across the team as they awaited his response. He sighed, looking over to me with a softened gaze. Before he could open his mouth, a commotion from the entrance caused us to turn our heads to the group walking into the pool area.

My stomach dropped as my eyes widened when I realized who they were. They were faces I would recognize anywhere. My eyes locked with Landon and I instantly reached out for Fox, grabbing onto his arm and pulling him toward me.

"We have to go," I rushed out, pulling Fox toward the pool steps.

"What's going on?" he asked as he followed me. "Is that your old team."

All I could do was nod as I rushed us over toward our things, not even bothering to dry off as I pulled my shirt over my head and grabbed my phone. Landon watched with amusement as Fox stood close to me, glaring over at them.

"Are they the ones sending you messages?" Fox asked in a low tone, not even looking at me as he continued his stare at the group.

"We can talk about it upstairs," I said, picking his shirt up off the chair and shoving it into his chest.

"Elijah," Josh called out as he rushed over to us.

"We're going," I told him.

As the three of us tried going for the exit, Landon and his group stopped in front of us. Landon stood directly in front of me with a blank expression on his face. I knew what he was capable of. He had beat me before, getting all of his followers to join in. He wasn't a nice guy and he wasn't afraid to hurt me.

Fox shoved me behind him and stood face to face with Landon. Landon smirked, looking behind Fox at me.

"You got a little boyfriend sticking up for you now?" Landon asked in a humorous tone.

"Fuck off," Fox spat, stepping closer to him. Landon raised his eyebrows, looking him up and down.

"Two fucking faggots on the same team," Landon hissed, narrowing his eyes at Fox.

"Fox, let's go," I begged, though I wasn't sure we'd be able to get by them without something happening.

"Call us faggots one more time," Fox seethed in a threatening tone.

By this time, the rest of our team had gotten out of the pool and made their way over to us. Ian and Ryan got themselves to the front of the crowd beside me as if they were ready to defend Fox at any moment.

"Fucking," Landon said, stepping closer. "Faggots."

On his last word, Landon shoved Fox backwards and caused him to bump into me. Fox was quick to react, grabbing Landon by the throat and restraining him in a headlock. The group behind him looked as if they were ready to fight, but thought better of it.

"You really want to start a fight right now?" Fox snapped. "There's twenty of us and six of you and you want to fight?"

Landon squirmed in his grip, grabbing at his arm to try to get him to release him.

"Fox, let him go," I said and Fox almost instantly did. I walked ahead of Fox to come directly in front of Landon's beet red face. The redness was more from his embarrassment than from Fox holding him.

"If you have a problem with me, then you take it up with me on the ice," I seethed, my jaw clenched as he stared at me in disgust. "But you bring him into it and we're going to have a bigger problem."

I wasn't going to let Landon and his stupidity ruin Fox's first day being out of the closet. He was always anxious about how people would perceive him, and I wasn't going to let people from my past hurt him. It wasn't fair to him and I wouldn't be able to bear it.

The team followed me out of the pool area as I left Landon before he could reply to my words.

"That guy is fuckin' stupid dude," Jude said aloud as we all made our way to the elevators.

Fox was quiet the whole way to the room as we parted with the rest of the team.

"Since pool time got cut short, Ryan invited us over to their room for a little bit, you in?" Ian asked as we got to the door.

"Nah, we'll stay here," Fox answered for us as he unlocked the door. Josh sent me a look of concern but ultimately followed Ian down to Ryan's room while I entered ours with Fox.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. I felt awkward and unsure. Not knowing what he was thinking was pulling my insecurities out in full force.

"Will you tell me about the messages?" Fox dodged the question.

I sighed but nodded anyway, sitting down on the edge of our bed. "Just a few of the guys from my old team sending me mean stuff."

"Like what? Did they threaten you?"

"Kind of," I sheepishly admitted. Fox's expression soured as he looked at me with a glare.

"What is 'kind of?' Did they or didn't they?" he asked, his tone indicating that he was fed up.

"They did," I confirmed.

Fox sighed, pulling at his hair. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I let out a humorless laugh. "Fox, I didn't know where I stood with you. I still don't."

His expression softened slightly, but he still looked utterly pissed off.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking down at the floor. "We can figure it out after the tournament, alright? After I come out to my family."

"You're going to come out to them?"

"They're the people I was least worried about knowing," he said. "Well, besides Wren and he already knows."

I hummed in agreement as he sat down beside me.

"I know you don't wanna hide, I really don't either," Fox admitted, a content look on his face as his eyes stared into mine.

My face heat up as my lips slowly quirked into a smile.

"So you want to be a couple?" I asked. "After you tell your family?"

Fox nodded. "Yes."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay, that's what I want too," I clarified.

Fox looked relieved, his posture slacking slightly and his lips curling upward. He leaned closer to me, his eyes darting toward my lips. My face seemed to be pulled by magnetic force, meeting his in the middle and brushing our lips together.

The kiss started off soft until Fox took more control, shifting so that he was on top of me and lying my body down on the bed. My lips moved at the same quick pace as his, our tongues clashing as I reached to the back of his neck and pulled him closer. His hips were grinding against mine as his lips traveled to the side of my jaw.

"We smell like chlorine," he said in a breathless tone against my skin.

I let out a content sigh as he continued kissing my skin.

"Wanna shower?" he asked, pulling away from me and sitting up on my hips.

My eyes shot open at his words. I looked at him to see if he was joking, but his face was questioning, not a joke in sight.

"Just shower...?" I apprehensively wondered. "Or something more because we don't have—"

"I bought some," Fox cut me off with a coy expression.

I raised my eyebrows, propping myself up on my elbows.

"You bought some?" I echoed. "What, did you just *know* you were going to get lucky?"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "It was just wishful thinking."

"When did you even have time to buy it?"

"I went to the convenience store downstairs while you napped earlier," Fox answered with a shrug.

"They sell condoms and lube at that store?"

"Apparently."

I bit my bottom lip, looking up at Fox. He smirked down at me like he knew he had me right where he wanted me. And he did.

A few moments later we were rushing into the bathroom, the shower steaming up the room.

**

Thanks for reading!

I know I've been updating on Thursdays a lot lately but today is my only day off this week so it's the only time I have to get anything done. Also, I had more plans for this chapter but it became longer than I thought it was so the rest of the tournament is getting pushed to next chapter.

Anyway, let me know what you think of the chapter. What did you think about Elijah calling his dad? And the dinner with the team?

What about going to the pool and seeing Landon? And Fox and Elijah's alone time?

Let me know!

40

A pull on my hair dragged me out of sleep. I slowly opened my eyes to see Fox staring at his phone as I rested my head on his arm, his fingers playing with my hair.

After a few moments of staring at the side of his face, he turned toward me, placing his phone down on his bare chest.

"We have to be to breakfast in half an hour," he told me.

I let out a long groan, turning to rest my head on his chest.

"I'm tired," I mumbled into his skin.

"Worn out from last night?" he joked.

"Sh!"

I sat up and slapped my hand over his mouth, turning to look at Josh to make sure he hadn't heard what Fox just said. He was still asleep, his head hiding under a pillow and his leg hanging off the side of the bed.

Fox chuckled, pulling me down so I was lying on top of him. He was about to say something when his phone buzzed, causing him to roll his eyes as he picked it up to check the text.

"What's that?" I asked, rolling off of him.

"My annoying siblings are here to watch the tournament," Fox muttered, answering the text.

"All of them?"

"Yep."

Fox's parents, like mine, couldn't get the time off to make it to the tournament. But his siblings were all on break from school.

I stood up from the bed, stumbling a bit when a dull ache in my back side slowed my movements.

"Shit," I groaned, the pain becoming more constant the more I thought about it.

Fox snickered from his spot on the bed, causing me to send a glare his way, grimacing as my movements fueled the pain.

"I haven't had sex in a while, alright?" I said, glancing over at Josh to make sure he was still sleeping. "It hurts."

"I'm sorry," Fox replied, though he didn't sound all that sorry. "We can switch next time."

My eyes widened at what he was offering.

"You better not be joking," I said, pointing a finger at him. "Because I'll take you up on that."

"I'm not joking," he assured me in a serious tone, standing up from the bed.

I stood still, continuing to be shocked at his words as he came over to me and placed a long kiss on my mouth before heading into the bathroom. Just as he shut the bathroom door, Josh's alarm went off, waking he and Ian.

Ian groaned, sitting up with his hair disheveled and sticking in every direction. Josh continued to sleep like a rock until Ian gave him a hard shove so that he would turn the alarm off. Without picking up his head, Josh shot his arm out from under the covers and grabbed his phone and silencing it.

Once we had all gotten ready, we made it down to breakfast where the coaches were already waiting. The rest of the team slowly showed up, Alex squinting as he made his way to the table, obviously having just woken up.

"Boys we need to make this quick," Coach Silva started. "I need you guys at the rink in an hour so we can get your skates sharpened and get our practice time on the ice."

Coach finished telling us the schedule for the day then allowed us to continue our breakfast.

"Why didn't you two come to our room last night?" Alex asked Fox and me, pointing toward us with his fork.

"We were busy," Fox shot back, looking as if he was daring Alex to continue.

"Busy fuc—"

"Stop," I warned, glancing at him with a glare.

Alex just smirked, nudging Jude with his elbow. "They totally did."

"Alex, stop," Josh hissed.

Jude snickered but didn't say anything else about the topic as we finished our breakfast.

We spent all morning getting ready for our first game. We would have to win two games today if we wanted to make it to tomorrow. Then, we would have to play another game the next morning to make it to the final round which would be later that night. It was an action packed few days.

The only way we would have to play my old team was if we won both of our games today and they won both of their's. Then, we would have to play them in the morning and beat them if we wanted to make it to the final round.

I could only hope they would be losing today.

***

It was a relief that we had ended up winning both of our games. We had fought hard and the work paid off as we would be able to compete again the

next day.

Fox and I were resting in bed, my head on his chest as he was texting back and forth with Raven. Josh was in the shower while Ian napped.

"They want us to go with them to the arcade," Fox muttered as a text popped up from Raven.

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

After leaving a note for Josh about where we went, Fox and I met his family down at the arcade where Colt and Wren were partaking in a heated game of air hockey.

"Elijah!" Fawn exclaimed as we made our way over to them.

Fox scoffed and walked over to her, ruffling her hair and earning a loud smack on his arm.

"Fox Lee Ridley!" Fawn screeched, her eyebrows angrily knitted together and her mouth pointing downward in a frown. "How many times do I have to tell you? Don't touch my hair!"

"Your middle name is Lee?" I laughed, earning a glare from Fox.

"We all have L middle names," Fawn answered, moving to stand on the other side of me, away from Fox.

"If you can't tell, our mom is obsessed with themes," Robin added with a laugh.

Raven came over to stand beside Fox, throwing an arm around him.

"Good games today," she said, hugging him from the side. "But you have to watch it at the blue line. You went offside, like, three times in one game because you jumped the blue line."

Fox rolled his eyes. "Okay."

"I really wish we could've taken Ava," Fawn said to me, a look of disappointment on her face.

"That would've been fun," I agreed.

"Elijah," Raven called out, gaining my attention. "You played really great today."

I smiled at her. "Thanks."

"No criticism for him?" Fox questioned his sister with raised eyebrows.

She pat him on the shoulder with a smug smile. "Nope."

"So," Robin started, taking a sip of his beer. "How did you two become so close? Fox has never hung out with one of his friends this much."

"Uh..." I trailed, looking to Fox for help. He stared off into space for a moment, contemplating on what he should tell his brother.

"That's a stupid question, Rob," Wren interjected as he hit the air hockey puck into Colt's goal, a frustrated groan coming from Colt.

"I'm just wondering," Robin defended. "I mean the only one of his friends I've ever seen this much is Claudia and they were dating."

"Ian stays over all the time," Wren pointed out in a bored tone.

"That's different," Robin replied, waving him off.

Wren wouldn't look over at Fox and me but it felt like this was his way of trying to mend things with his brother, taking the attention off of our relationship.

Fox didn't seem to be paying any attention to him as he glanced around the room, his eyes darkening when they landed on a target.

"We have to go," Fox said, still staring ahead.

"You just got here!" Robin complained.

I followed Fox's line of vision to see that Dave and my mom were sitting over in the bar area on the other side of the room. Neither of them seemed to have noticed us.

"Fox, it's fine," I tried to assure him but he just shook his head.

"Is everything okay?" Raven asked, looking around to try to see what Fox was glaring at.

"Are you staring at that guy who's looking over here?" Robin questioned, pointing toward Dave.

My eyes shot back toward where the two sat to see that Dave had noticed me.

"Who is that guy?" Wren asked, turning around to see what we were all looking at.

"No one," I answered, turning around so I wouldn't have to look at Dave.

"We can leave," Fox said in a low tone.

"It's fine," I repeated.

We spent a little while longer with Fox's family. He and Wren hadn't said anything to each other, not that I expected them to. It made me wonder why Wren had come here at all.

We managed to make it through the night without Dave or my mother bothering us. After a little while, we went back to the hotel room to get sleep for the busy day we had tomorrow.

***

The atmosphere as we entered the rink was tense. Although there was noise coming from the large crowd, the room seemed silent as I locked eyes with Dave. His only focus was me, watching my every move as I stepped onto the ice behind Ian for warm ups.

"That the stepdad?" Ian asked as we skated together. I just hummed in response.

Luckily, the other team stayed on their side of the ice for the remainder of warm ups. I knew they wouldn't be that courteous during the game though. Once the puck dropped, they would be coming for me.

Fox's shoulders were tense as I followed him onto the bench. I placed my hand on his back.

"We just gotta play," I reminded him in a hushed tone.

We sat down together on the bench, Fox's expression etched in a frown.

"If any of them go for you, I'm taking them out," he said, looking straight ahead.

"Fox."

"I'm not kidding, if that Landon asshole isn't careful, his head might just become detached from his body."

There was no use in arguing with him.

"Elijah," Coach Silva called out from behind me. "If you feel threatened or uncomfortable at any time, come back to the bench."

I just nodded. I wasn't going to be sitting out of this game.

After one last pep talk, Coach sent us out onto the ice for puck drop.

Landon and Fox lined up at the center dot, both hunching over with rigid postures for the face off. I couldn't help but feel nervous having Fox so close to him.

The referee dropped the puck and Fox won the face off, the puck finding its way onto Josh's stick. I followed Josh as he skated up ice toward our attacking zone. Josh passed the puck cross ice toward Alex, but Landon intercepted it and changed direction.

I started skating backwards before turning and heading for Landon. I forced him into the boards, causing him to send the puck back toward one of his teammates.

Ian was able to steal the puck back and shoot it up ice as we made our way to the bench for a shift change. We watched as Ryan sped up the ice, ripping a shot toward the net and past the goalie. Getting an early lead in the game caused an eruption of cheers from our bench.

Eventually our line got put back on the ice against Landon's. I could tell he was frustrated he was losing so early in the game. He always got more aggressive when the team was losing. Landon slammed Alex into the boards and stole the puck. Fox and I were quick to follow him. His shot deflected off me and Fox took the puck.

The rest of Landon's line left the ice for a change but Dave signaled for him to stay. Landon chased down Fox and shoved into his shoulder with so much force it nearly knocked him over. Fox was still able to get a shot off and the goalie stopped it, resulting in a stoppage of play.

"Landon," I called out, causing him to drag his narrowed eyes toward me. "Cool it."

An evil looking smirk overtook his face. We skated by each other as we made our way back to our respective benches.

"I found out the best way to mess with you is to mess with him," Landon said in a low tone, his eyes directed toward Fox.

He stepped onto his bench and earned a nod of appreciation from Dave.

"Fox," I hissed as I quickly made it back to our bench. "Fox!"

"Not right now," he said as Coach Silva was drawing something on a whiteboard for him to see.

"Landon is trying to hurt you," I told him, nudging his side. Fox turned to look at me with a confused expression.

"He's not gonna hurt me," he said, trying to be reassuring but it did nothing to ease my nerves.

I could deal with Landon trying to hurt me but if he did something to Fox, that would hurt me more and he knew it.

"Fox," I whined.

It seemed like we hadn't been on the bench that long but it was already time for us to go back out. A pit formed in my stomach as Fox lined up across from Landon.

Fox won the face off but soon after Landon got the puck and the two of them were in a battle at the corner. Landon's elbow came up under Fox's chin as he slammed Fox into the boards. The refs didn't call an elbowing penalty which caused an uproar from Coach Silva.

Landon and Fox continued their rough pursuit of the puck. Words were exchanged between the two of them, Landon obviously getting angrier by the second.

The next few moments seemed to happen in slow motion.

Landon lifted his stick and cross checked Fox across the chest with so much force both of them went tumbling to the ice. The whistles blew as Landon grabbed at Fox's helmet, ripping it from his head to land a punch on his face.

Without thinking, I sprung into action but I was pulled back by one of my old teammates.

The moments after that happened quickly.

I shoved the guy off me but he was quick to grab the back of my jersey and spin me around. I didn't know how it happened, but a full on brawl began to take place on the ice.

Players from the benches swarmed onto the ice, throwing their gloves and helmets off and getting themselves someone to fight with. My helmet flew off my head and I was immediately hit with a punch in the face.

The punch left me disoriented for a few moments before I realized another was coming and I dodged it. I swung a fist and landed a hard hit, spinning around to try to get to Fox.

Fox was still down in the ice with Landon, the refs preoccupied with other players. I sped over to the two of them, knocking Landon off of Fox.

"Are you hurt?" I asked him in a panicked tone. He just stood up and made his way back over to Landon.

I tried to stop him, but someone grabbed me from behind, pulling me away. My elbow repeatedly prodded into the person but they just held me tighter.

"Elijah stop it right now," Dave's voice said from behind me. This only caused me to start writhing, desperate to be free from his grip.

I noticed the coaches were all out on the ice, trying to control their players. Coach Silva grabbed ahold of Ian who was fighting an old teammate of mine that was way bigger than him.

Ryan was down on the ice on top of someone, holding his arms down as he tried to throw punches up at him. I caught a glimpse of Alex throwing a punch to someone's face when suddenly there was a collision behind me and I was released.

I turned to see Josh had shoved Dave away from me.

"Stay away from him," Josh seethed toward Dave who wore a dramatically offended expression.

I didn't have time to stay and thank Josh. My skates glided back toward Fox and Landon to see their fight had progressed. Both had bloody knuckles dripping onto the ice and injured faces.

I couldn't make it all the way to them before security had gotten onto the ice and started pulling everyone apart.

When Fox was grabbed I could finally get a good look at his face. His nose was bleeding and his lip was split. The rest of his face had some bruising but it seemed like he had given a similar treatment to Landon.

We were all being shoved into our respective locker rooms about to face the wrath of our seething coaches.

**

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading and sorry this chapter is a little late. I didn't have any time off this week from work so it was hard to find time to write it and I ended up just finishing it up on my phone in bed lol.

What did you think of the chapter? The morning after for Fox and Elijah and breakfast with the team? What about Fox's family being there and spending time with them. And what about the game? And the fights on the ice? What do you think is going to happen after that happened?

Also this amazing cover was made by @Maddie_Briarwood

Please check it out!!!!

41

Coach Silva paced in front of the team as we sat down on the benches in the locker room while Coach Merton stood at the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. Looking around at the rest of the team, we were a rough looking bunch. Everyone had bruised faces and knuckles, some even bleeding.

Our coach had been too silent since he entered the locker room. His silence was more terrifying than if he came in screaming. We didn't know what to expect from him and it was agonizing waiting for him to speak.

He finally stopped after a while, standing in front of us with a stern expression and his lips tightly pressed together.

"I honestly don't know what to say," Coach Silva started. "I never expected *that* from this group of players, truly."

The room stayed silent.

"Needless to say, we are going to be disqualified from the tournament," he continued. "And probably going to have to face some consequences from our league. I'll have to sit in meetings with the league board and try to negotiate with them not to end our entire season."

Fox glared down at his skates, the bruising painted on his face like permanent marks. All I wanted was to reach to him and take the marks and pain away.

"I thought it was obvious that fighting was not tolerated," Coach Silva said. "But apparently that message never got across."

Coach Silva looked over to Coach Merton, the two of them seeming to have a silent conversation, before turning back to the team.

"Everyone needs to go back to their hotel rooms and stay there. We will let you know what's going on and when we're leaving in a little bit," Coach Silva finished, dismissing us.

We started getting out of our gear, frustration clear from Fox as he tore his pads off and threw them on the floor. I bit the inside of my cheek as I watched him undress, not knowing if anything I could say would ease his emotions.

Fox noticed me staring, dragging his eyes to my face and his expression hardening as he zeroed in on where my skin throbbed.

"Are you okay?" he asked me, tightly pressing his lips together.

"I'm fine," I assured him. "Are you?"

Fox scoffed and nodded as he threw a new shirt on over his head and grabbed his things.

"That kid's got a weak punch," he said, though by the look of him, the punches didn't look weak.

Bruises created patterns on his face while blood dried under his nose and on his knuckles. There was a particularly dark mark under his eye that made me wince as I looked at it. A weak punch wouldn't do this much damage.

"What did you say to him to make him freak out like that?" I asked, grabbing my bag and walking with Fox toward the exit of the locker room.

Coach Silva had made us wait a little longer in the locker room until the other team had all made it back to their hotel rooms so that there would be no more altercations between us. Once he gave us the go-ahead, we left ahead of the rest of our team to walk across the street to the hotel.

"Literally nothing. He's insane," Fox grumbled, stomping along our path.

I gave him a knowing look, silently telling him I knew that wasn't true.

He sighed, adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder.

"Fine," he said with an exaggerated breath out. "He was calling me all sorts of stupid names and then he started talking about you and I was like 'This is a bit much. Are you sure you're not in love with him?' and he freaked out."

"What the hell?"

"Yeah," Fox replied in an irritated tone. "So FYI, Landon might actually be in love with you."

Fox's eyes were narrowed as he looked straight ahead while the two of us crossed the street. Obviously, the thought of Landon being in love with me didn't sit well with him, not that I was thrilled by the idea either.

"I bet that's not true," I said, not entirely sure if I wanted to convince him or myself.

Fox dramatically rolled his neck to send me a sullen look that told me he thought I was being naive. Maybe I was, but I didn't want to think of that even being a possibility after Landon had started a fight with Fox. I couldn't even look at Fox's face without getting angry, the marks being reminders that Landon had hurt him because of me.

I looked down at my feet, a sick feeling in my stomach forcing guilt to cloud my thoughts. This was my fault. Fox had come out because he wanted to be with me and I wouldn't stay secret for him. That made him a target, all because I was too selfish to give him what he needed.

"Don't do that," Fox muttered as we stepped into the hotel and into the elevator.

"Do what?" I mumbled, raising my gaze to his as he stared at me with a serious expression.

"I can tell you're feeling guilty," he said. "So stop it."

I shook my head at him, looking back at my feet. "It's my fault, I—"

"Believe it or not, Elijah, but you can't carry the burden of every bad thing that happens," Fox cut me off, causing my gaze to go back to his. "You

blame yourself for everything, even how other people treat you."

"If I never made you feel like you had to come out, this wouldn't have happened," I argued. The elevator doors opened, but neither of us moved.

"First of all, yes it would have," Fox shot back, slamming the button to close the doors. "Landon is an asshole and if he didn't know about me then he would have done it to you."

He continued just as I opened my mouth to speak.

"And second of all, you didn't make me feel like I *had* to come out," Fox said, his voice getting louder as he brought his face closer to mine. "You made me *want* to. There's a huge difference."

The elevator stopped at a floor, but Fox was quick to close the doors again and send us back to our floor before anyone else could get on.

"It sounds the same to me," I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest as Fox sent me an annoyed look through narrowed eyes.

"It's not the same," he said, stepping closer to me and letting out a sigh. "It was a sudden decision, literally I decided to do it right then and there. It wasn't planned, it just felt right."

I glanced at him and saw that his expression had softened. His face was unreadable like it was the night on the lake, calm but impossible to read.

"I just looked at you while you were skating around on the lake, the sunset hit you so perfectly, you looked like you were glowing and your smile was wider than I had ever seen it," Fox continued in a smooth, low tone, tugging on my hand and uncrossing my arms. "You looked so happy and I was like 'Wow. I want to see him that happy all the time.'"

My breath hitched in my throat as I looked down at our connected hands.

"I wanted to kiss you so bad," Fox admitted with a chuckle, looking down at our hands with a faint smile. "And I was sick of only being able to do it in secret. I was sick of being afraid."

The elevator doors opened again and this time we walked out hand in hand.

"I'm glad you did," I said in a small voice. "Kiss me, I mean."

Fox looked at me with a close-lipped smile. "Me too."

Even though I couldn't help but blame myself for anything Fox would have to endure due to coming out, I couldn't stop myself from being happy he did. Things were going to be hard but at least we could go through it together. We didn't have to worry about the team or anything they had to say and Fox's worries that they wouldn't respect him anymore were proven to be false. There were other things to worry about, but none of it seemed to matter at that moment. We had each other and that mattered greatly.

I felt safe with Fox's hand in mine as we continued down the hall toward our hotel room. When we turned the corner, neither of us were prepared for who was standing outside our door.

Fox let go of my hand and stomped over to the door when he laid eyes on Wren. Wren seemed unbothered as he leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest and a wry smile on his face.

"Back off. I'm not in the mood to deal with you right now," Fox spat, pulling the room key out of his wallet to open the door.

Wren glanced over at me as I made my way to the door, not being put off by his brother's brash attitude.

"I just wanted to check up on you," Wren said in a bored tone.

Fox ignored his brother, opening the door and going inside the room. Wren was quick to catch the door and follow him, holding the door open for me. When Fox saw that Wren had followed him inside, his expression soured as he sat down on the edge of the bed. Wren stood in front of him and I stood off to the side, frightened to witness whatever would happen between the feuding brothers.

"I know you're not here because you're worried about me," Fox pointed out, raising his eyebrows. "So what do you actually want?"

Wren shook his head at him, placing his hands on my hips. "I can actually be worried about my brother after seeing him get tackled during a hockey game, you know that right?"

"It seems unlikely."

I didn't know whether I should leave. Fox definitely wouldn't want me to, but I didn't want to be intruding on a private moment between the two of them.

"Why is it so hard for you to believe that I actually care about you?" Wren asked, his voice raising.

"Because you never have before," Fox replied with an eye roll.

Wren scoffed. "Yes, I have."

"Seriously, fuck off," Fox spat, his eyes turning to slits. "I'm still very pissed off about the game and I'm warning you right now not to mess with me."

"Typical Fox, resorting to anger for his default emotion," Wren said in a dark tone. I could see Fox's eyes darken.

"Yeah and you're so perfect right?" Fox snapped. "You don't get angry, you just get manipulative. You shouldn't have even come here!"

The room felt too small for these two clashing personalities.

"Why shouldn't I have come here?"

"Because you're just acting like everything is fine between us!" Fox exclaimed, standing up from the bed. "But you've never even apologized for trying to manipulate Elijah into telling me you knew about us and freaking him out. Yes, I know you tried to get him to do it and you owe him an apology!"

Wren let out a sigh. "Okay, to be fair Fox, I did let you punch me for that."

Fox scoffed. "You've punched me for less."

Wren shrugged and hummed in agreement which only seemed to make Fox angrier.

"I don't even understand why you did that!" Fox continued, throwing his hands up in the air. "It literally makes no sense. You wanted me to know but didn't want to be the one to tell me? And then ended up telling me anyway?"

"Maybe I just wanted to avoid getting punched," Wren retorted.

"No because I'm pretty damn certain that you didn't just want me to know for the sake of me knowing," Fox said in an almost hissing tone. "You have a motive, you always do."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, you don't remember when I first got my license and you, being the nice brother you are, let me use the car just so I could pick your drunk ass up every weekend?" Fox seethed. "But any other time I wanted to use it, I couldn't? Or when you manipulated me into taking the blame when you drunkenly crashed into the fence?"

"Mom and Dad expected you to crash into shit because you just got your license, it wasn't like you got in trouble!" Wren shot back in an irritated tone.

"Right, but you didn't deserve any consequences for *actually* doing it?" Fox said, raising his eyebrows at his brother. "And now you take every chance you get to lecture me when you're the one always doing messed up shit."

The two of them didn't look like they were ready to stop the arguing any time soon. I was hoping for Josh and Ian to show up to the room, but as each moment went by, the door remained closed.

Wren let out a heavy breath, his hand rubbing his forehead.

"I just wanted to check up on you, not argue. What do you want from me, Fox?"

Fox's jaw clenched. "I want you to tell me *why* you tried manipulating Elijah, I want you to apologize to him, and then I want you to leave."

Wren was silent for a few moments as he and his brother shared hard stares. The tension was thick as we waited for Wren's response. I couldn't help but wonder why he wanted me to tell Fox he knew about his sexuality. It was a strange situation and at this moment, Wren knowing didn't seem to matter much. So why was it such a big deal before?

"I wanted you to know because I wanted you to come out," Wren admitted with a sigh. "I thought if you knew that I knew, it would freak you out and if Elijah was the one to tell you, it would make you think I would tell people, so you would do it before I could."

"Why the fuck were you so obsessed with me coming out?" Fox yelled, his mouth parted. "Why did it fucking matter so much?"

"Because I'm bisexual," Wren confessed and the words hung in the air.

I could tell by the blank look on Fox's face that he didn't know what to say. He was trying not to explode.

"And I'm such a terrible brother because I thought that if you came out first, it would take the heat off of me when I did," Wren continued in an emotionless voice.

That was enough to cause the explosion.

"What the hell is the matter with you!" Fox exclaimed as he began pacing around the room.

I wanted to reach out and hold his hand to calm him down, but I knew it wouldn't work.

"Are you that fucking self-centered that you don't even realize how different our situations are?" Fox continued, shaking his head as he paced the floor.

Wren silently stared at his brother as Fox came to a stop in front of him.

"I'm trying to get college hockey teams to recruit me, you already go to a liberal ass Ivy League school that would love to use you as a token of their diversity!" Fox boomed. "I have things to lose, you don't!"

Wren just stood there, letting his brother scream in his face. It felt like Wren was using this as a way to punish himself. He felt guilty, but he didn't want to admit it, so he would settle for allowing Fox to take out his frustrations on him. I would almost feel bad for him if he didn't just admit to using Fox's coming out for his own gain.

Before Fox could continue ripping into his brother, there was a loud knock on the door, causing all of us to look over at it. An uncomfortable feeling crept across my body. If it were Josh and Ian, they wouldn't be knocking. If it were the coaches or anyone from the team, they would've announced themselves after we didn't immediately open the door.

I shared my nervous expression with Fox and he made his way to the door, checking the peephole and letting out a curse.

"It's Dave and your mom," Fox muttered just as they knocked on the door again.

"Should we call Coach Silva?" I asked in a slightly panicked tone.

"He's probably still in his meeting with the tournament people," Fox replied, another knock causing his face to darken even more.

Wren walked over to the door and lightly moved Fox out of the way. He opened the door and slipped out, shutting it before anyone could get in.

"What the hell is he doing?" I hissed as Fox looked through the peephole.

"He's talking to them," Fox replied, placing his ear against the door to try to hear what they were saying.

"Can you hear anything?" I asked him. Fox shook his head and looked through the peephole again.

"They're gone," Fox said, his voice sounding slightly confused.

"Wren too?"

Fox nodded and backed away from the door.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"You've been asking me that a lot lately," Fox pointed out with a grin.

"That's because a lot has been happening lately," I replied.

"Wren's an asshole, I already knew that and I'll get over it," Fox said, leaning back against the door.

A moment later another knock sounded on the door. Fox groaned and turned to look through the peephole before opening the door to reveal Wren.

"You're welcome," was all Wren said before turning on his heel and walking away.

Fox glared at him as he walked away just as Josh and Ian made their way to us.

"What's going on?" Josh asked as he entered the room and Fox slammed the door behind them.

"Long story," I replied.

"Your mother is going to kill you going home looking like that," Fox told Ian as he took in his bruised appearance.

Ian looked just as bad as Fox, but that was what he got for going after a guy twice his size.

Ian shrugged. "She'll probably whack me a few times, tell me how stupid I am, and then ask me for money, so nothing new."

I shook my head at him and plopped myself down on the bed. I couldn't wait to be back home. There was too much drama for me in too few days.

"At least one good thing came out of this trip," Josh said, sitting at the edge of his bed. He was a little bruised like I was, nothing like Fox and Ian.

Ian scoffed. "Like what?"

"Fox and Elijah get to be together," Josh said, a faint smile on his face.

Fox and I shared a look as he got down on the bed beside me.

"Yeah," Fox started with a content sigh. "At least we have that."

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading!

I wrote all of this TODAY instead of writing a little bit each day so that's why it's coming so late. I've had a busy week and a rough couple of days so I wasn't even sure I was going to be able to get this done, but I did it!

Anyway, let me know what you think of the chapter! What sort of consequences do you think the team will face? What did you think about the elevator scene with Fox and Elijah? Do you think Elijah is being too harsh on himself? What about the scene with Wren. Was anyone surprised about his confession?

Let me know!

42

"Wake up, cuties!"

Alex's excited voice startled me awake on the bus. Fox still slept with his head in my lap, laying down across the seats.

Soon after we got banished to our hotel rooms earlier in the day, the coaches announced we would be leaving but didn't tell us anything other than that.

It was quite late, almost eleven PM when we finally made it back to the school. I could already see Dad's car waiting for Josh and me in the parking lot.

I placed my hand on Fox's cheek, moving it up to stroke his hair.

"Wake up," I said, gently tugging on his hair.

He groaned, squinting up at me. Alex leaned over the seat, putting his face in front of Fox's. Fox shoved his face away and sat up.

"That just ruined my night," Fox said, glaring over at Alex.

"You're so fucking rude, you know that?" Alex retorted with a matching glare.

I laughed at their banter, standing up and following them out of the bus. We all gathered our things and Coach Silva told us we would have a team meeting when we got back to school.

"You should come over tomorrow before Ryan's New Year's Eve party, we can go together," Fox suggested as the team dispersed. "If you're actually let out of your house."

"I don't know if my dad will let me out of his sight," I admitted with a sigh.

Fox nodded, looking down at the ground as he adjusted his bag on his shoulder.

"Hopefully I'll see you," he said, looking up at me. "I gotta go though. Ian's waiting for me."

"Yeah, my Dad's been staring at us since we got out of the bus," I told him, nodding toward the car where Dad sat with Josh beside him.

Fox looked toward the car briefly then back at me. He seemed to be contemplating something before he said one last goodbye and headed over to his car.

I sighed, wishing he would have kissed me but knowing he didn't because my Dad had been watching us. My feet dragged on the pavement as I trudged over to the car, popping the trunk and throwing my bag inside before sliding into the back seat.

"Are you alright, Elijah?" Dad asked as I put my seatbelt on.

"I'm fine," I told him truthfully.

What happened at the tournament hadn't scarred me as bad as it could have. It could have gone a lot worse. I was still relieved that it was over but I knew I was lucky it hadn't been worse.

"We'll talk more in the morning," Dad said as he started out of the parking lot. "All of us."

Josh and I shared a look but didn't say anything. Coach Silva must have called all the parents about what had gone on because Dad didn't seem surprised by the bruises on our faces.

The next morning I woke up earlier than I anticipated. Dad was already downstairs with Mindy, both of them turning to me when they heard my footsteps enter the kitchen.

Mindy instantly stood up and gave me a hug, kissing my cheek.

"I missed my boys," Mindy admitted with a smile as she pulled away. "I'm sorry you guys couldn't finish the tournament."

I just shrugged. It wasn't that I was worried about. I was more worried about this affecting the rest of the season and our chances at college hockey. I had already applied to plenty of schools near and far, but I was still hoping to sign with a team, as were the rest of the guys I was sure.

"Is it alright if I go to Fox's later?" I asked, sitting down at the table with them.

I knew Dad would worry about me the whole time I was out but Mindy always had a way of calming him down. If she was around, he would find it hard to say no to me. It was mean, but I wanted to see Fox.

"What will you guys be doing?" Dad asked.

Nothing I would want my father knowing about.

"Just hanging out at his house and then going to Ryan's later for New Year's eve," I replied, sharing a look with Mindy.

"Who's going to be at Ryan's?"

"Dan," Mindy interjected, placing a delicate hand on his shoulder. "Just let him go. I doubt either of the boys want to be here for Ava's sleepover."

I silently thanked her with a look of gratitude as Dad let out a sigh and nodded.

"I know the fight at the game wasn't your fault," Dad started. "But I worry about you. I don't want any of those stupid kids trying to do anything to you."

"It'll just be the guys at Ryan's," I assured him. "And Josh will probably be there."

I wasn't exactly sure who would be there considering Ryan was planning on throwing a party, but Dad didn't need to know that.

"And Fox?" he asked and my eyes slightly widened.

"Yeah, we're going together," I said, my voice a little higher than I intended.

"I've always liked him," Dad said to me. "He's a good friend to you." Mindy hummed in agreement, taking a sip of her coffee.

I nodded. "He is."

Knowing my father and Mindy liked Fox filled me with relief. When the time came to tell them about our relationship, at least I could be sure that they wouldn't hate him.

Ava came down the stairs a few minutes later, her hair up in a very messy ponytail with strands sticking out in every direction. Her eyes were still slightly swollen with sleep as she sat down beside me and squinted at the bruise on my face.

"Did you at least get a good punch in?" she asked me, landing a solid punch on my shoulder.

"Ow," I complained, rubbing where she had hit me.

"Ava don't hit him," Mindy scolded while Dad laughed at us.

Ava scoffed and shook her head at me, uttering a quiet, "Wimp."

"I did get a punch in," I told her with a grin. "If it matters."

She sent me a wicked smile. "Hell yeah."

"So, who's coming to your sleepover tonight?" I asked her as Mindy stood from the table to get more coffee.

"My friends," Ava replied in an irritated tone as if I had made her state the obvious.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, but *who* ?"

"Fawn, Kenzie, Bri, Josie, and Carrie," she listed.

"I only know Fawn."

"Obviously."

It was no use waiting around for Josh to get out of bed, so the four of us ate breakfast without him. Josh tended to sleep like the dead at times and after we got in late last night, he would probably sleep for a few more hours. I had planned to do the same but my internal clock wasn't on the same page.

Once I was done with breakfast, I showered and got dressed, trying not to stare at my phone waiting for Fox to text or call. It didn't take long for my phone to ring with his name popping up.

"Hey," I answered.

"Are you on house arrest?" he asked.

I laughed. "No, are you?"

"No, come over," Fox insisted, his tone light.

"I'll be there in a little bit."

"Okay, be careful driving. I know how you are," Fox said, his tone serious.

"You're rude," I told him, to which he just chuckled. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

I hadn't even thought to ask him if he had come out to his parents yet before we hung up. I didn't have time to dwell on it as I said goodbye to my parents and drove over to Fox's house.

When I got to his house, he had opened the front door before I had even gotten out of the car as if he had been watching out the window to wait for me.

"Glad to see you made it here in one piece," Fox greeted me, stepping aside so I could enter the house. The bruises on his face were healing, but the one under his eye remained dark. It looked painful but I didn't want to bring any attention to it.

"I'm not as bad as a driver as you think I am," I told him with a pointed look. "I haven't crashed yet."

"It's only a matter of time," he retorted, leading me up the stairs and into his room.

I shook my head at him, not even bothering to respond as I sat down on his bed. Fox took that opportunity to sit down on my lap, his legs straddling my hips, and nudge me backward so that I was flat on my back. He laid his head down on my chest and my hand found its way into his hair.

"Are your parents home?" I asked, stroking the top of his hair.

"No," he mumbled against my shirt, his fingers tapping my chest. "They're supposed to be home soon though. They're getting stuff for tonight because they're having friends over."

"Did you tell them yet?" I wondered.

"No," he muttered.

"Why not?"

"I may or may not be nervous."

Fox kept his head down on my chest as he said this. I knew it was hard for him to admit his nerves since he always seemed to be so confident and sure of himself. Even though he knew his parents would love him no matter what, it didn't change the fact that this was a big deal to him and the aftermath of coming out to them scared him. That was what insecurity did to a person.

"You want me to be there when you tell them?" I guessed and his fingers went still on my chest.

"If you want to be there," Fox answered.

"I want to be there if you want me to be there."

Fox chuckled, his fingers moving to draw circles over my shirt. "Okay."

I felt him relax against me. His body wasn't as stiff and he allowed his body to mold into mine more easily.

It must have been at least an hour that the two of us stayed in that position, Fox's breathing evening out as if he had fallen asleep. I knew he hadn't because he continued moving his fingers up and down my abdomen.

Fox's head perked up a bit when we heard the front door open and close downstairs, signaling that his parents were home. I felt his body stiffen and I placed a comforting hand on his back. He sat up, his legs still on either side of my hips while I continued laying down while I looked up at him.

He sighed, standing up and holding his hand out for me to take. Fox pulled me up off the bed and started toward his bedroom door.

"Might as well get this over with," he said, opening the door and motioning for me to follow him.

He led me down the stairs and into the kitchen where his parents were currently unloading groceries together. Vanessa looked up when she heard us enter the kitchen, a smile breaking out on her face as she saw the two of us.

"It's good to see you, Elijah!" Vanessa exclaimed, walking over and giving me a hug. "I'm sorry about the tournament."

I smiled back at her and shrugged. "No need to be."

"I'm glad you boys defended yourselves," Leo added with a grin. "And each other. That's what teams do."

I just nodded while Fox didn't say anything. We stood there in silence for a few moments, Vanessa and Leo sharing looks of confusion as their son

stared them down.

"Well," Fox started, clearing his throat. "I'm gay."

"What the hell?" Leo replied, a shocked expression on his face. "That was fucking random, Fox."

Vanessa slapped her husband on the shoulder. "Leo!"

"I support him!" Leo exclaimed, rubbing his shoulder. "It was just random."

"What's random?" Fawn asked as she bounded into the kitchen, throwing open the fridge and taking out some fruit.

I looked to Fox who had a slightly amused expression as his dad looked panicked, not knowing whether Fox wanted his sister knowing.

"Uh..." Leo said. "The weather?"

Fox sighed, shaking his head at his father before turning to Fawn while Vanessa glared at her husband with narrowed eyes.

"I'm gay," Fox repeated to his sister.

"I already knew that," Fawn replied, waving him off.

"What? How?"

Fawn rolled her eyes, looking toward me then back at her brother.

"You have heart eyes every time you see Elijah," Fawn pointed out. "It's not that hard to figure out."

Leo and Vanessa's mouths gaped as they seemed to be putting the pieces together in their minds.

"How did I not make that connection?" Leo asked his wife.

"We are blind," Vanessa said, a look of realization on her face.

Fox and I shared a look and he shook his head in irritation at his family.

Leo walked over to Fox and wrapped him in a hug, Fox keeping his arms at his sides.

"Hug me," Leo urged, squeezing him tighter.

"Stop," Fox grumbled.

"C'mon Fox, let us show you our love," Vanessa said, joining in on the hug.

"Get off me," he whined, looking to me for help.

I laughed at the look of discomfort on his face as his parents continued showing their affection. His parents held onto him longer, his annoyance growing by the second. A moment passed and the front door open and shut again, Raven, Robin, and Wren entering the kitchen a second later.

"What are you guys doing to him?" Robin asked, pointing at the cluster of his parents and brother in the middle of the kitchen. "You're going to hurt his already injured face."

"We're not going to hurt him with our love, Robin," Leo replied with a slightly offended expression.

"What, did he tell you he's dating Elijah so you decided to show your love like *this* ?" Raven guessed, gesturing toward the three of them.

"What the hell?" Fox let out with a groan. "How did you even know that?"

"I'm gonna let you in on a secret, Fox," Fawn started. "The only ones who didn't notice your heart eyes were Mom and Dad."

Robin nodded in agreement. "Wren was the only skeptical one."

I noticed Wren hadn't said anything since entering the room. He stayed in the corner, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. He and Fox shared a look before Wren turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Eventually, Fox's parents let go of him and the two of us went back upstairs. Instead of entering his room, Fox stopped by a different door and opened it.

"Knock much?" I heard Wren's voice ask.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Fox asked him. "You saw how it turned out for me, you'll be fine."

Wren came to stand in the doorway and glanced over at me before looking back at his brother.

"I figured I'd let you have your moment," Wren responded before shutting the door and leaving us out in the hallway.

Fox sighed and the two of us went back into his bedroom.

"He's so weird," Fox groaned, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his forehead down on my shoulder.

I kissed the top of his head, my hands finding their way to his back.

"So you came out to your parents," I said after a few moments of silence.

I didn't want to come out and say it, but there was something I was expecting to happen for the two of us after this. He wanted to come out to his parents before we became anything serious, and he did.

"Yeah, I did," he responded, picking his head up but keeping his arms around my waist. "Are you going to make me ask you the question?"

I chuckled, throwing my head back slightly.

"I guess not," I told him. "I just want to know what this means for us."

"I want it to mean that we can be together," Fox said, his eyes looking deep into mine. "Like in an actual relationship."

I nodded. "I want that too."

"Then I guess that's settled," he said with a shrug.

I couldn't keep myself from leaning in and placing a kiss on his mouth. He smiled into the kiss, cupping my jaw in his hand.

This feeling and this moment made all the emotional pain I went through in the last few months seem worth it. I was safe here in his arms and he was safe with me.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I felt true happiness.

**

Happy Pride Month!!! Thanks for reading!

How did you like the chapter? What did you think about the morning with Elijah, Dan, and Mindy? Did you expect Fox to come out to his parents this chapter? What did you think of his parents' reactions? And what about the to of them FINALLY becoming a couple?

Also, I made a post about this but I also wanted to put it here:

BLACK LIVES MATTER. I stand in solidarity with the protestors fighting for change. This past semester at school, I took a class titled "Racism, Crime, and Justice" which opened my eyes to the violence committed by the justice system. It also opened my eyes to different ways the racism that most people think is gone is manifested in the present. For this class, I read a book called *Racism without Racists* by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva which I recommend to everyone as it teaches on contemporary racism in what many believe is a post-racism society.

I've been signing petitions and donating to bail funds in my state. You should too if you're able! There have also been videos on YouTube going around Twitter which the ad revenue will be donated.

Amplify black voices. Listen, learn, educate yourself. Read black literature. Support black owned business. Do not stay silent.

To my black readers: I appreciate you. I love you. I support you. THANK YOU.

Thanks!

43

Comfort was something I rarely ever felt. I always felt out of place, like I didn't belong.

Lying down on Fox's bed, his arms wrapped around me, his fingers playing with the hem of my shirt and brushing against the skin just above the waist of my pants, was comfortable. In his arms, with my head resting on his chest, was a place I belonged.

I never had this with anyone else, feeling so close that I could lay with them in silence and be entirely content. With Fox, everything was different. Everything made sense.

It was just about seven PM when Fox and I decided to head over to Ryan's. His party wasn't set to kick off for another hour, but he insisted the guys get there early.

When we got downstairs, we were greeted by Fox's parents in the living room.

"So we've been talking," Leo started, glancing at each of us.

Fox sighed, giving his father an impatient look.

"Don't give me attitude," Leo chastised, though he didn't sound all that serious.

"We were just thinking," Vanessa interjected. "Since you guys are dating, maybe we shouldn't be letting you upstairs with the door closed."

My face flushed while Fox scoffed.

"I think it's a little late for that," Fox said, glancing at his parents with raised eyebrows.

"Fox," I said through gritted teeth, smacking him on the shoulder with the back of my hand.

"He's kinda right," Leo said in a light tone, shrugging as he looked to his wife.

Vanessa gave him a stern look, her hands on her hips as she shook her head at him.

"That's what responsible parents do," Vanessa said.

"We're not responsible parents," Leo pointed out.

"We're leaving," Fox announced, grabbing onto my hand and leading me out of the house.

I said goodbye to his parents before he pulled me out of the house.

"They're going to be insufferable," Fox complained, walking with me to my car.

I chuckled. "Maybe."

"Are you taking your car?" Fox asked as he noticed me unlocking it.

"I have to go pick Josh up," I told him, opening the door.

"How about you drop the car off for him and then ride with me," he suggested with a grin.

"I guess I could do that," I replied, my expression matching his.

Fox followed closely behind me all the way to my house and I crookedly parked in the driveway once we got there. Dad was in the middle of taking out the trash when the two of us pulled up, waving us over.

"Are you guys heading out?" Dad asked when we each stepped out of our cars.

"Yeah I was just dropping the car off for Josh," I told him, glancing over at Fox who appeared to have an uneasy expression on his face.

"Wanna come in for a couple minutes? I'm sure Mindy would love to see you Fox," Dad said, a wide smile directed at my boyfriend.

Fox pressed his lips together. "Sure."

I gave him a quizzical look before we began following my dad up the driveway and into the house. Fox placed a hand on my hip, slowing me down so he could speak in my ear.

"Should we tell them?" Fox whispered, sounding slightly panicked.

"Chill. Why are you so worried about them knowing?" I whispered back.

"I don't want them to think I'm not good enough for you."

He looked like he hated to admit it, but it was truly a fear of his.

I shook my head, trying to reassure him as we met up with Dad, Mindy, and Josh in the kitchen. Ava must've already had her friends over considering the amount of giggling coming from the living room.

"Fox! It's good to see you!" Mindy exclaimed, standing to give him a hug.

"You too," he said, returning the favor.

"Aw, did you guys come to pick me up?" Josh teased as Mindy released Fox. "How sweet."

"Absolutely not," Fox retorted, causing me to laugh at Josh's faux offended face.

"I wouldn't wanna be in a car with you two anyway," Josh replied, waving him off. "I'd be hardcore third wheeling."

"What do you mean?" Dad asked, tilting his head to the side with a confused expression.

Josh's eyes widened, along with Fox's, while Mindy and Dad looked around at each of us as if waiting for an explanation.

"Um," I started, clearing my throat. "Josh would be third wheeling because Fox and I are dating."

"I knew it!" Mindy shouted, jumping up from her seat and pointing at us, barely giving time for the words to finish leaving my mouth.

I shouldn't have even been surprised. Mindy knew everything. However, that didn't stop the air from leaving my lungs and the startled noise from escaping my throat as I thought of Mindy speculating about Fox and me.

Fox still looked worried, his teeth trapping his bottom lip between them.

"You're what?" Dad asked incredulously, his eyes widening as he looked between us and Mindy.

"They're dating, Dan," Josh clarified in an even tone.

"Since when?" he asked, looking at me and then darting his eyes to Mindy. "And how did you know about it?"

"Since a couple hours ago," Fox answered, scratching the back of his neck. He looked like he was more uncomfortable telling my parents about us dating than he was coming out to his own.

"I just had a feeling," Mindy replied with a sly smile, glancing at the two of us. "Call it mother's intuition."

Dad distantly stared toward the wall, looking as if his mind was processing this new information. A forced smile stretched onto his face after a few moments, turning his gaze to Fox and me.

"I'm really happy for you guys," he said, patting Fox on the shoulder before leaving the room.

The four of us left in the kitchen stood in an awkward silence until Fox spoke up.

"He hates me," Fox blurted.

"He doesn't hate you," Mindy, Josh, and I said in unison.

"He's just processing the fact that his son has a boyfriend," Mindy assured him. "It's nothing against you. He loves you."

Fox just nodded, though he didn't look entirely convinced or consoled by Mindy's words. I knew her words were true. Dad was insanely protective of me and he wasn't expecting me to get into a relationship.

When the two of us left the house and got into Fox's car, he was still quiet.

"You don't seriously think my dad hates you, right?" I asked Fox, reaching over to rest my hand over his which was gripping the gear shift.

"He looked like we just caused him to have a midlife crisis," Fox retorted in a deadpanned tone.

"No, he didn't," I said, fighting the urge to roll my eyes at him. "He's freaked out about me having a boyfriend because he's always worried about me."

Fox kept a pout on his face as he let out a shallow sigh.

I gripped his hand tighter. "I promise he doesn't hate you."

Fox nodded and we moved on from the subject for the rest of the ride to Ryan's house. Familiar cars lined up in the driveway as most of the other guys were already there. Fox and I made our way into the house, not bothering to knock, knowing Ryan's parents weren't home. The two of us descended the steps into the basement where the rest of our friends were.

"There are our favorite lovebirds!" Alex greeted as Fox and I made our way into Ryan's basement, earning chuckles from the rest of the guys.

Fox led me over to the couch, glaring at Alex as we sat down and throwing his arm around my shoulder.

"So, Elijah," Ryan started, turning toward me. "I had already invited Trevor and them to the party before knowing you were with Fox. Is that gonna be weird for you?"

I instantly shook my head. "No, it's fine," I assured him. "We're friends."

I hadn't even thought about Trevor and the rest of GSA, and the fact that none of them knew I was with Fox. This was all so new and I didn't know how any of them would react. It was possible that Trevor still had a crush on me and I really couldn't bear hurting his feelings any more than when I had rejected him.

I was so lost in my thoughts I hadn't even noticed Josh had arrived a few minutes after we did. He sat on the other side of the room with Ian while Fox and Alex bickered beside me and the others watched whatever Ryan had playing on the TV.

Ryan seemed to have already set everything up for the party, so now we all just waited for people to arrive. No one wanted to be the first, before the party had even kicked off, so it would probably be quite some time until everything was in full swing.

Within a couple hours, basically our entire class was at Ryan's house, and even some underclassmen as well.

While Fox was playing beer pong with Ryan, Jude, and Ian, I decided to get a drink and see if I could find the GSA group. They weren't that hard to find once I got upstairs. Lexa, Nadia, Claudia, and Holly were all dancing around together while the guys were standing on the other side of the room, talking to some of their other friends.

Trevor spotted me as soon as I reappeared in the living room after grabbing myself a beer. He excitedly waved me over to him.

"Hey!" Trevor greeted once I reached him, pulling me into a quick hug. "I'm sorry about the tournament."

"Thanks, Trev," I said, releasing him from the hug and taking a sip of my beer.

I waited a moment to see if any of them brought up Fox. It was possible that since word got out about the fight at the tournament, that word had also gotten out about Fox and me, but they said nothing.

"I was looking at some of the hockey guys," Austin started, grinning over the rim of a beer can. "And you guys look pretty hot with all those bruises."

Johnny smacked him on the back of the head. "Sorry," Johnny said, glancing toward me. "That's the only thing he ever thinks about."

"Trust me, I know," I replied.

"Did you have a good time besides the whole getting disqualified thing?" Trevor asked with a kind smile, his tone upbeat and hopeful.

I thought back on everything else that happened the last few days. Despite all the bad things that happened, there was one good thing. And he just happened to show up before I could respond.

"I was wondering where you went," Fox said, coming up behind me and standing close.

"I was bored of watching you lose at beer pong," I joked, causing Fox to place his hand on his chest as if I had wounded him.

"Obviously, you didn't watch long enough because Ian and I ended up winning," he boasted with a triumphant smile.

"I could go for schooling someone in beer pong right now," Austin said, taking a sip out of his can.

"Alex was looking for someone to lose to," Fox told him. "You should go play him."

Fox's eyes traveled to the beer can in my hand and then back up to my eyes.

"You're drinking tonight?" he asked me, his eyebrows raised as he pointed toward the can.

"You're not?" I countered.

He shook his head. "Ian drank for me in pong. Someone needs to drive us home later."

"You guys came together?" Trevor wondered, his tone light.

"Uh... yeah," I stuttered, looking to Fox for help, but he kept his expression blank as he wordlessly nodded at Trevor.

Austin finished off the rest of his beer, letting out a content sigh.

"You guys coming down to watch me beat Alex at beer pong?" Austin asked as he started making his way to the basement stairs, Trevor and Johnny following behind him.

"We'll come down in a little bit," I said, watching as they left us.

As soon as they were down the stairs and out of sight, Fox turned to me with an irritated expression.

"You don't want Trevor knowing about us?" he asked in a sharp tone.

" *What* ?" I hissed.

"You obviously didn't tell him," Fox retorted, crossing his arms over his chest. "He acted all confused as to why we would be leaving together."

I scoffed, shaking my head at him. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not."

"I didn't know if *you* were okay with me telling everyone," I tried reasoning. "So I didn't say anything."

Fox huffed, keeping his eyes away from me as he kept a scowl on his face. He was irritated, but he knew he was overreacting.

"I'm sorry," Fox mumbled, still looking away from me as he rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "I guess I'm still jealous when it comes to him."

"You don't need to be," I assured him with a smile, wrapping my arm around his shoulder and discreetly kissing the side of his head.

Fox grinned and the two of us made our way back to the basement with the rest of the guys.

***

By ten minutes to midnight, I was drunk. However, I was in a considerably better mood than the last time I was drunk since then I was using liquor to forget and now I was just having some beers to have fun with my friends.

I was curled up against Fox's side as we watched the New Year's eve special on TV. Alex was passed out, lying down across the beer pong table after losing too many games. The GSA kids had gone back upstairs for the girls, so it was mostly just the hockey team and some others who were still in the basement.

"Are you guys staying over tonight?" Ryan asked, walking over to us. "I'm just trying to figure out where I can put everybody. I really don't want to leave Alex on the table."

I laughed, which I was doing a lot of in this state.

"We're going back to my place," Fox answered for us, tightening his arm around me. "I can take Josh and Ian home if they wanna go."

Josh looked like he was completely out of it. I hadn't seen much of him all night, but just by the distant, glossy look in his eyes I could tell he had quite a lot to drink.

As the minutes went by, more and more people started watching the TV for the countdown to midnight.

"Are you going to kiss me at midnight, Foxy?" I asked, nuzzling my face in his neck.

Ian burst out laughing from the other side of the couch.

" *Foxy* ," he laughed, his smile wider than I had ever seen it.

"Shut up," Fox snapped at him before turning to me with a soft smile, "Of course I am."

I sat up when the countdown started and people began to yell it out loud. Fox sat up next to me, his arm around my shoulder while mine was around his waist.

"3... 2... 1... Happy New Year!"

At the words, Fox had his lips on mine. There was so much noise around us, making it hard to even think. My mind was swimming from the alcohol, so I knew my kiss was sloppy, but Fox didn't seem to mind. His hand was under my chin, propping my face up ever so slightly as he kissed me.

We broke apart, Fox smiling at me and kissing my forehead before I returned to my earlier position, snuggled into his side. The party started winding down after midnight. People started going back upstairs, others had passed out on the floor. It had gotten to the point where the only ones awake were Fox, Josh, Ian, Ryan, Jude, and me. We sat around on the couches as the party dwindled.

Josh looked down at his lap and I could tell something was off with him, even in my intoxication.

"What's up Joshua?" I slurred, closing my eyes for a few seconds before reopening them.

"Hm?"

"Yeah you seem kinda down bro," Ryan pointed out, leaning back in his seat. "You drink too much?"

Josh shook his head then thought for a moment.

"Well, maybe a little," he admitted.

"I can bring you home if you want," Fox offered.

Josh shook his head again.

"I just— I–" he stopped himself.

"Joshuaaaa," I dragged out. "What's goin' on?"

"I saw Trevor tonight," he started with a sigh, looking toward me. "And I wanted to apologize to him and I just *couldn't* . I'm too much of a coward."

"What do you need to apologize to him for?" Jude asked, a confused expression on his face.

"You remember that party we went to freshman year? The one the seniors threw?" Josh asked, causing the others to nod.

I was too drunk to tell him to stop. He was drunk, admitting something he would never admit if he was sober.

"Oh yeah," Ian laughed. "I remember that."

"I kissed Trevor that night," Josh confessed in a rushed tone. "We were alone and we were talking and I kissed him."

Everyone was silent. Fox slowly turned his head toward me, but I kept my eyes on Josh.

"And after I treated him so badly," Josh said with a shaky voice. "And I feel so bad and I just want to *apologize."*

"You can still apologize, Josh," Ryan consoled him in an even tone. "Trevor's a really good guy. He will forgive you."

Josh didn't say anything and we were stuck in another silence before Ian started laughing again, causing the rest of us to join him.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I remembered how comfortable I felt against Fox.

***

Waking in the middle of the night, I had no idea where I was until I looked around and saw Fox sleeping beside me. I couldn't figure out how he had gotten me to his house without waking me.

My mind was still dizzy and my throat was dry. I stumbled a bit as I stood up from the bed, looking back to make sure I didn't wake Fox.

I tiptoed out of his bedroom and down the stairs to the kitchen. My heart nearly popped out of my chest when I realized I wasn't alone in the kitchen.

"Fuck," I cursed, placing my hand over my chest. "You scared me."

Wren wordlessly stared at me from where he sat at the kitchen table, a glass of water in front of him.

"What are you doing up?" I asked as I got my own glass of water and stood against the fridge.

"I can't sleep," he said in a low tone. His eyes looked a little glazed, telling me he had probably been drinking.

I nodded, sipping on my water.

"Fox didn't drive drunk, did he?" Wren asked, looking down at his glass.

I shook my head. "He didn't drink."

Wren just nodded, taking a long gulp of water.

"Have you fessed up to your parents yet?" I asked. I was still feeling the alcohol a bit, so any filter I had wasn't as strong as usual.

Wren let out a humorless laugh. "No."

"Well, you got what you wanted," I pointed out. "Fox did it first and it turned out fine."

"Yeah and he hates me even more now," Wren snapped in a rare moment where he showed anything other than confidence.

"You can still apologize," I suggested with a shrug.

Wren scoffed. "I don't apologize."

"Then that's your problem," I replied. "If you ever want to actually make up with him, then come talk to me."

"You would help me?" he asked, sending a wary glance my way.

"Sure," I said. "But it would be for him, not for you."

I finished off my water and left the kitchen before Wren could say anything else.

I tripped on something entering the bedroom, causing Fox to open his eyes.

"Where did you go?" he asked in a raspy voice, rubbing his eyes.

I climbed into bed next to him, intertwining my legs with his and throwing my arm around his waist.

"Just got a drink," I said. "Go back to sleep, Foxy." I planted a kiss on his cheek before lying my head down on the pillow.

"Don't call me that in front of the guys," Fox mumbled, trailing off toward the end as he close his eyes and started dozing off.

I chuckled quietly before sleep took over me in my place of comfort.

**

Thanks for reading! Sorry this is a little later than usual. I was working all day and had to finish up the chapter when I got home.

Also, I'm not sure how many chapters are going to be left but I wanted to let people know we're getting close to the end. I know how I want it to end and I'm trying to figure out exactly how to get there. When I have a definite number of chapters left I'll let you know.

Anyway, what did you think of the chapter? What about Dan and Mindy's reactions to Fox and Elijah dating? And the New Year's eve party? And what about Elijah's conversation with Wren?

44

"Elijah..."

I groaned, rolling over and burying my head in the pillow.

"Elijah," Fox's raspy voice repeated.

He shook me awake, causing me to turn my head toward him while keeping it on the pillow and open my eyes. It was then that I heard a faint buzzing coming from the floor.

"Your phone keeps going off," he said.

I leaned over the side of the bed and picked my phone up off the floor where it must have fallen last night. Luckily, I checked the caller ID before blindly answering.

"It's my mom," I told him, sitting up and rubbing my eye with the back of my hand. "My head hurts. It's too early to deal with her."

My hangover wasn't too bad but it was bad enough that I didn't want to add speaking with my mother to it. I decline the call and silenced the ringer, moving to put the phone down on the nightstand. Just as I was about to place it down, her name popped up again.

Fox released an unsatisfied groan from his throat as he glanced over my shoulder at the caller ID.

"What the hell could that woman possibly want from you?" he asked, his tone dark and still full of sleep.

I couldn't find the answer to that. All my mother ever wanted from me was to be her perfect son and part of me still wished that she would come to her senses and love me for how I was now. It felt slightly fatuous to still have that desire for my mother's affection. I was eighteen, a legal adult, I didn't

need my mother anymore, especially since I had integrated into my father's family.

Despite that, there was still a slight pull on my heart every time I thought of her. There was a weaker part of me that wanted to allow myself to fall into her trap with the hope that she had changed her mind even though the smarter part of me, cynical as it may be, knew she hadn't.

I allowed the call to go to voicemail and in less than five seconds she was calling again. My thumb hovered over the screen, ready to answer or decline.

"Don't answer it, Elijah," Fox said in a stern tone, sitting up so that we were shoulder to shoulder. "She doesn't deserve you."

"What if something is wrong?" I asked in a small voice as I continued staring down at the screen.

I had everything I wanted; I felt at home with my family, I had a group of friends that actually liked me, and I had Fox. But the thought of my mother actually needing me was enough for me to want to try again with her, to see if she could love me for how I am now.

"It's not your problem," Fox tried to assure me, placing his hand on my bare shoulder.

"What if Dave hurt her?" I wondered, a horrified look on my face as I turned to Fox.

He didn't answer as she called back again. I couldn't blame him, really. It was a tough situation. What if he told me not to answer and she was actually in danger? What if I answered and she pulled me into her trap again?

Before she got sent to my voicemail again, my thumb was sliding over the screen before I could stop myself.

"Mom?" I answered, my tone slightly panicked as I tried and failed to keep an even tone.

"Elijah, I need you to come over," she replied.

"Is everything okay?" I asked her, feeling Fox's eyes intently staring at the side of my face.

"I have some news to share with you," she vaguely responded. "It's urgent."

"What is it?"

"I need to speak to you in person about it," Mom insisted.

I glanced over at Fox who just shook his head. He still felt guilty about the last time I had gone to my mother's, the time he had encouraged me to do so. I could see it in his eyes.

"Is Dave there?"

"Elijah," Mom pleaded.

I let out a shaky sigh, my head pounding as my hand rubbed my forehead, a trait I inherited from my father.

"Okay," I said in a low tone.

Mom let out a content sigh. "Thank you. I will see you soon."

As soon as I hung up, I felt Fox's glare on my skin.

"You shouldn't have done that," Fox told me, his voice low and matching the look on his face.

I knew he was right and I wasn't going to argue with him about it. He wouldn't understand and that wasn't his fault. Fox grew up with loving parents and a big family. Most of my life was just me, my mom, and Dave. Dave and I were never close and he felt like a stranger in our home, but even with him around I spent a lot of time with my mom. It took a while to

get used to life without her, but it was hard to completely erase her from my life. Especially when she was so pertinacious about getting me back at times.

"I need to know what she has to say," I mumbled, lying back down on the bed while Fox looked down at me.

"It doesn't matter," he shot back. "She is not good for you."

"I know," I replied in a dull tone.

Fox's sharp eyes softened as he looked down at me. He laid back down beside me, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing my shoulder.

"I don't want her and Dave hurting you anymore," Fox mumbled against my skin as he kissed up to my neck and jaw.

I hummed in agreement, tickled by the kisses he left on my neck.

"So you're really going there?" he asked me.

"I told her I would," I said, kissing his cheek and feeling him relax at my touch.

"I'm going with you," he asserted in a serious tone.

I sighed, locking eyes with him. The look on his face told me he wasn't going to budge on this.

"You being there is just going to set Dave off," I told him.

"So I'll make sure he doesn't go near you," Fox instantly replied.

I gave him a pointed look.

"He's not going to hit me if I don't piss him off," I said. "You being there is automatically going to piss him off, especially if he finds out we're dating."

"He probably already knows," Fox responded, resting his head on my shoulder. "Your secret admirer Lance, or whatever his name is, probably told him."

I rolled my eyes. " *Landon* can't possibly be in love with me."

"Trust me," Fox started, looking up a the ceiling. "It's entirely possible."

"Well if Dave already knows, that's even more of a reason for you to stay away," I told him, causing him to turn his head to look at me.

"Last time you went in there alone, he punched you in the face," Fox reminded me, raising his eyebrows and looking as if he was ready to keep arguing with me.

"I'm going to be fine," I assured him.

Fox didn't look convinced. His eyes were narrowed and if his arms weren't around me, they'd be crossed in front of him.

"You can come if you stay in the car," I amended, hoping he would take this as a compromise.

"I'm going inside if anything seems sketchy," he responded in a serious tone.

I sighed. "Fine."

Once the two of us were in agreement, we got up from the bed and got ready for the day. Fox had lent me some clothes after we showered and brushed our teeth.

Fox seemed to remember the way to my mother's house without any direction from me, despite only having picked me up from the street one time.

"It's this next house up on the right," I directed, pointing toward my old home.

Both Dave's and Mom's cars were in the driveway, but I had expected that. Mom wasn't one to do anything without her husband, even when it concerned me.

Fox pulled up to the curb and parked, staring past me to look at the house.

"You're going to stay here," I asserted, gaining his attention. "Right?"

"Only if nothing sketchy goes on," Fox replied.

I rolled my eyes, opening the door to get out of the car. I looked back at Fox one last time to make sure he was staying in the car before walking up the porch to the front door. My hand rose and I knocked on the door. This wasn't my home anymore, it wouldn't feel right to walk in.

Mom was quick to open the door like she had been waiting there for me. Her smile was wide as she stepped aside to welcome me in. Her hair was in neat curls and her makeup done to perfection like always.

"Thank you for coming, Elijah," she said, leading me into the dining area where Dave was already seated.

"What's the news you had to tell me?" I asked, looking between Mom and Dave.

Mom looked sickeningly happy and my mind automatically turned to the worst. *She better not be pregnant ,* I thought. Not only was my mother in her forties, but no child deserved to be stuck with her *and* Dave as parents. I was lucky to have my father.

"Come sit," Dave instructed.

Mom instantly sat down beside him at his words while I moved slower to sit across from them. I braced myself for what they were about to tell me. *Please don't be pregnant, please don't be pregnant, please—*

"We're moving," Dave announced, my mother looking to me with an excited expression like she expected me to jump with joy.

"Oh," was all I could come up with.

"Dave got a position at a Catholic high school in Pennsylvania," Mom explained, placing her hand over Dave's on the table.

"That's great," I said, trying not to sound too excited.

Them moving out of state seemed like the best thing that could happen to me at that moment. I needed there to be more space between us. If I couldn't go see my mom, then she wouldn't be able to try to guilt me into having a relationship with her.

"There's a good program at the church there," Dave added. "For people like you. My brother runs it."

I just nodded, not knowing what to say to that. If I just nodded and listened to them, acting like I was interested, I could get out of here soon and never have to speak to them again.

"It'll be really beneficial for you," Mom said. "I think this is exactly what we need as a family."

"Wait," I interjected, feeling as though I had just gotten whiplash. "What are you talking about?"

"You're coming with us," Dave answered in a tone as if it was final, like I had no say. Mom happily nodded.

"No, I'm not," I denied, shaking my head. "I'm staying here. With Dad." With my family. With my friends. With Fox.

"Elijah," Dave said in a stern tone as if it was a warning. "Don't argue. We've let you stay with your father for too long and it has made you think that you can actually live like this."

I let out a humorless chuckle. "Live like what? Happy? Free? Loved?"

"Sweetie, you can live like that with us," Mom said, reaching across the table to move her hand from Dave's to mine. "You'll go to the program, fix

your relationship with God and everything will be okay."

I shook my head at every word she spoke.

"And you won't be alone," Dave added. "Landon will be joining us. His parents are trusting us to look after him while he's in the program."

"Landon?" I choked out, my eyes widening. "Landon's gay?"

"Landon is misguided," Dave corrected. "He has lusted after you in the past but he is willing to change that."

My stomach became queasy at the thought of Landon liking me. Fox had been right, at least somewhat. Landon may not have been in love with me, but he was attracted to me and hated me for it. As much as I hated Landon for all he had done to me, I didn't want to see this happen to him.

"And we cannot stay at this church any longer," Dave continued. "They are on the verge of becoming too lenient after the Hanson's decided to leave."

The mention of Micah's family leaving the church shocked me.

"They left?" I asked, quirking my head to the side in confusion.

Mom nodded. "They said they didn't like what the church was doing and decided to go elsewhere."

"They're going to a church that celebrates your sin," Dave intervened in a hard tone. "Others are talking about going with them. I say good riddance."

"I think this move will be great for us," Mom said, bringing us back on topic. "You can finish school there, then maybe play hockey for Penn State. You and Landon can help each other out."

"I'm not going," I asserted again. "My senior year is almost over, I'm not finishing it somewhere else."

"You *will* be coming with us," Dave demanded, his stony eyes locking with mine. "Whether you like it or not."

I scoffed, standing up from the table.

"I have to go," I said. "Fox is waiting for me outside."

"How dare you bring that manner-less heathen to our home," Dave seethed, standing up.

"He may have no manners, but he's my boyfriend," I spat, turning around and quickly scurrying out of the house before Dave or Mom could say anything.

Fox gave me a strange look as I practically threw myself into his car and slammed the door shut.

"What the hell happened?" Fox asked, looking from me to the house to see Dave walking outside.

"Drive, idiot!" I exclaimed, causing Fox to shift the car into drive and slam on the gas, sending us jolting forward.

"What the hell was he doing?" Fox loudly asked. "I should go back there and beat his ass."

"They're moving and trying to force me to go with them to go to some program to convert me," I explained in a rushed tone. "Then got mad when I said I didn't want to go."

"Holy shit," Fox cursed. "Where are they going?"

"Somewhere in Pennsylvania I guess," I muttered, leaning my head against the window.

We were silent for a few moments before I shot my head up, suddenly remembering what they had said about Landon. I felt conflicted on telling Fox about him considering I didn't know if he was actually out of the closet.

"They're taking Landon with them," I admitted in a panicked tone.

"What?"

"His parents are sending him away with them," I continued, looking toward Fox. "Either he's gay or they think he is. They want him to do the program."

"That's messed up," Fox said, looking at me briefly and then turning back to the road.

"I know he's a dick, but—"

"But you wanna help him?" Fox finished for me.

I nodded with a sigh. "Yeah, I do."

"How? What can you do?" Fox questioned. "There's no reasoning with those people."

He was right. People like Dave were set in their ways and people like Mom were too submissive to stray from the beliefs of their husbands. Landon's parents were the exact same way. None of them would change their minds.

"Maybe Micah's family can help," I thought out loud, causing Fox to glance at me with a confused look.

"Why would they?"

"Apparently they left the church for one that accepts gay people," I told him with hope filled eyes. "Maybe they can intervene. Everyone likes Micah's dad, they listen to him."

It didn't take any more discussion for me to be directing Fox toward the Hanson's house. It wasn't too far from my mother's neighborhood and we made it there in less than five minutes. This time, I couldn't force Fox to stay in the car and he followed me up to the house where I knocked on the door.

Mr. Hanson opened the door, his eyes widening slightly when he saw us. He quickly changed his expression to a more welcoming one and smiled at us.

"Elijah, it's good to see you," he greeted. "And you are?"

"This is Fox," I told him. "I need to talk to you."

Mr. Hanson looked confused but stepped aside to let us in anyway. The Hanson's home always felt more like a home than my own. This was a family that truly loved each other. He brought us into the living room and sat across from us on the couch as we sat down on the love seat.

"Is everything alright?" Mr. Hanson asked, concern evident in his tone and on his face, reminding me of my own father.

"Dave and Mom told me that you left the church," I started, leaning closer to Fox and putting my hand over his on the cushion.

Mr. Hanson nodded. "Dave started leading bible study more and more, not leaving any room for discussion or interpretations. It wasn't so much the masses that made us want to leave but the community."

"They're moving and they want to take me to some conversion program," I told him, letting out a shaky breath. Fox gripped my hand.

"They can't do that, Elijah," Mr. Hanson responded in a reassuring tone. "They can't take you and they can't change you."

"But they're taking Landon," I said and Mr. Hanson's face drained of color. "Apparently his parents are letting them take him."

It was then that Micah came down the stairs, surprise evident on his face when he saw Fox and I sitting on the love seat, clenching each other's hands.

"Is everything okay?" Micah asked, standing at the bottom of the stairs. His face had a fading bruise on the jaw, but other than that there was no evidence on him of the brawl that took place at the tournament.

"There's an issue," Mr. Hanson told his son before retelling the information I had shared.

"How can we convince his parents to let him stay?" Micah asked, sitting down beside his father and looking at Fox and me.

I squeezed Fox's hand tighter.

"I don't know," I admitted with a sigh. "I was hoping you guys could do something. The people there listen to you, Mr. Hanson."

"Not all of them do," he replied with a sullen expression. "Dave had gotten quite a few allies by the time we left."

"But you can try, right?" Fox said, his tone sharp.

Mr. Hanson looked at him and nodded. "I can try."

"We're not just talking about praying the problem away," Fox added, his tone still cutting like knives.

" *Fox* ," I hissed.

"No, no," Mr. Hanson said. "I will actually talk to them. I will still pray, but I'll talk to them."

We didn't stay much longer after Mr. Hanson promised to intervene. There wasn't much I could do, but he had a lot of say at that church.

When we got back into Fox's car, the weight of the situation began to hit me. My mother and Dave wanted to rip me away from the life I had made without them after they threw me out. They wanted their perfect, Catholic son that they could brag about to their friends and they were willing to have me traumatized to get it.

I had finally become happy but they still haunted me like ghouls living in the shadows. They hid, let me believe that I was safe, then came out to try and pull me back into the darkness.

**

Thank you so much for reading!

So I spent some time over the past few days outlining everything I need to get done to finish this story and I came up with about 4 more

chapters (so there will be a total of 48) and an Epilogue. I'll see if I can stick to that. If not, it'll end up being more but not less.

What did you think of the chapter? What about Elijah's decision to talk to his mother? And what Susan and Dave told him? And Landon? What about Elijah's decision to talk to Micah's father?

45

The silence in the car on the way to my house was almost painful. The weight of what my mother and Dave wanted to do to me was causing pressure in my chest. And the fact that they were doing it to Landon too made my stomach sick.

Fox's hands tightly gripped the steering wheel, his jaw set and tense.

"This is so fucked up," I muttered, running my hand through my hair.

"I wish they would just leave you the fuck alone," he snapped, gripping the wheel even tighter. "They've put you through enough."

"It's Dave," I told him, leaning my head on the window. "He puts these thoughts in her head and she just agrees."

Fox let out a heavy breath through his nose.

"He is the devil," he muttered, shaking his head as we pulled up to my house.

I moved to get out of the car, noticing Fox wasn't following me.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked in confusion.

"Your dad hates me," he reminded me, his eyebrows raised.

I rolled my eyes at him, walking around the car and opening his door. I pulled on his arm, causing Fox to unbuckle his seatbelt and allow me to drag him out of the car.

I pulled him close, wrapping my arm around his waist and giving him a slow kiss. My arm tightened around him as I walked him backwards, closing the door and leaning him against the car.

Fox brought his hand to the back of my head, pushing my face closer to his and tangling his fingers in my hair.

We finally pulled apart when a car beeped loudly at us. I jumped away, my heart hammering in my chest at the sound. My face hardened when I realized it had been Josh who had just driven by and pulled into the driveway.

Josh waved with a sarcastic smile as he got out of the car. Fox flipped him off, a deadpanned look on his face, before the two of us walked up to the house behind him.

"Are you guys going to be one of *those* couples now?" Josh asked he opened the front door, glancing back at us.

"You jealous?" Fox retorted, following him into the house.

Josh sent him a look of disgust.

"Boys?" Mindy called out before Josh could reply.

We followed her voice into the kitchen where Ava and all her friends were sitting around the table eating lunch. The girls whispered and giggled to each other while glancing at the three of us. Ava and Fawn shook their heads at them.

"Are you boys hungry?" Mindy asked as she washed her hands at the sink. "I made lunch."

Fox, Josh, and I sat down at the table with the girls as they continued whispering what I could only assume was about us. Ava's friends eventually got picked up by their parents so that the only one left was Fawn.

"What did you guys do last night?" I asked the two girls, taking a bite out of my sandwich.

"What did *you* do last night?" Ava retorted, earning a laugh from Fawn.

I shared a look with Fox. "She's always so rude to me."

"That's what little sisters do," Fox replied, glancing over at Fawn.

"I'm so glad you guys weren't here last night," Fawn said to which Ava nodded in agreement.

"See, that's rude," Fox said, pointing at his sister.

"No," Ava started, shaking her head. "Because as soon as you showed up all our friends just started talking about how *hot* they think you guys are."

Ava and Fawn shared disgusted looks.

"Well, we are," Fox said as if he was stating the obvious.

"Gross," Fawn complained.

"Kenzie has always had a crush on Josh," Ava added with an eye roll. "That's why I don't usually invite her over."

"That's funny," Fox laughed with a mischievous look on his face. "Fawn used to have a crush on Jo–"

"Fox Lee Ridley!" Fawn screeched, a deadly glare directed at him.

Josh just chuckled, sending a kind smile toward Fawn. The poor girl looked embarrassed, yet murderous. She wanted to kill her brother and I couldn't blame her.

"Don't embarrass your sister," I said, placing my hand on Fox's leg.

"She deserves it," he grumbled.

A moment later, Dad sauntered into the kitchen with a bright smile on his face as he looked at each of us. He made his way over to Mindy and gave her a kiss on the cheek before sitting down at the table with us.

He seemed perkier than usual and that was saying a lot. His hands were clasped together in front of him as his leg bounced under the table. He

looked so content and if I told him about Mom and Dave then it would only sour his mood.

"Did you guys have a good night?" Dad asked, his voice upbeat.

Josh looked down at the table, not wanting to meet anyone's gaze. It was evident that his night was not so good.

"It was fun," I replied, looking to Fox for confirmation. "Right?"

Fox hummed in agreement, nodding his head. He sat straighter in his seat, his leg nervously bouncing beneath my hand. It was strange to see Fox this way. He never usually showed his discomfort in situations. My father, of all people, had his usually confident self feeling self conscious.

Dad sensed the tension and immediately placed an apologetic look on his face as he glanced at Fox.

"I wanted to apologize, Fox and Elijah," Dad started in a sincere tone. "For how I reacted yesterday."

Fox seemed to calm down a bit at the words.

"I just worry about Elijah so much," he continued. "But I'm glad you two are together. I can't think of anyone better suited for my son than you, Fox."

My lips quirked upward as I looked between Fox and my father. Fox's pinched expression softened and I felt the tension leave his body. That was all he needed to hear, that my father didn't hate him for dating me.

"Thank you," Fox said, a soft smile blooming on his lips.

"See? He doesn't hate you," I teased, knocking my leg into his.

"You thought I hated you?" Dad asked, astonished with a sad expression.

Fox glared at me, his cheeks tinging pink.

"He was just a little worried about your reaction," Mindy interjected, going to sit by Dad.

"Fox is a little dramatic," Fawn added with a smirk. "He tries to hide it, it doesn't work."

"Fawn," Fox hissed, a scowl directed toward his sister.

I laughed along with Ava and Fawn, placing my hand over Fox's on the table. His gaze softened when he turned to look at me and we shared glowing looks for a moment before I glanced past him to see Josh. He was still looking down, his gaze focused on the table in front of him. He had seemingly missed the entire conversation, zoning out on whatever occupied his mind.

"Is everything alright, Josh?" Dad asked, noticing his son's detachment from the rest of us.

Josh looked up, surprised to see all eyes on him. He looked around at all of us, biting down on his bottom lip, before his gaze landed on me. He looked as if he was trying to silently communicate with me but I couldn't decipher what his expression meant.

"I just—" Josh started, then sighed before continuing. "I just didn't have a good night."

"Honey, what's wrong?" Mindy wondered with a look of concern.

Josh looked close to admitting what was truly bothering him, but he was still holding back. He was contemplating because this was something he always tried so hard to keep out of his mind, but he knew there was no going back after our parents knew.

Josh let out a shaky breath, moving his gaze from me to Mindy.

"I've just been feeling really guilty lately," he mumbled, looking down at the table. "I treated someone badly for a while."

Fox and I glanced at each other briefly. Josh's guilt was clearly burdening him. He looked tired and pale, the weight of his guilt physically affecting him.

"Why?" Mindy curiously wondered.

Josh took a deep breath and his eyes slowly moved upward to lock on his mother.

"I kissed a guy," Josh admitted, his confession hanging in the silence. "And I treated him badly afterward. Then Elijah found out and I panicked and said awful things to him and now the guilt of it all is eating me alive."

"Josh, I'm not mad at you for that," I immediately assured him, willing him to meet my gaze, but he didn't.

What Josh had said to me hurt, but I had come to realize that the break down between the both of us was necessary to build our relationship and move on. We needed to air out our feelings to be able to fix our tainted relationship.

"Honey," Mindy called out, grabbing Josh's attention. "Let's go talk."

She stood up and Josh followed slowly behind her, the two of them leaving the rest of us in silence.

"Let's go upstairs," I said in a hushed tone in Fox's ear.

He nodded, getting up to follow me.

"Uh," Dad stopped us, holding his hand up and causing the girls to snicker.

"Dad, don't," I groaned, pushing my hair back with my hand.

"Just keep the door open," he said, his voice light yet stern.

I let out another groan and nodded, Fox looking increasingly uncomfortable.

Once we got to my room, I shut the door almost all the way, only leaving it ajar.

"Your Dad's going to come up here and barge in," Fox said as he sat down on my bed, eyebrows raised as his head motioned toward the door.

"No, he won't," I assured him, turning to sit down on his lap.

He moved his hands up to my hips and leaned back slightly as my hand snaked around his shoulders, my hands meeting behind his neck. I tried connecting our lips, but Fox leaned back, his eyes blazing like a heavy thought burdened his mind.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaning back. "You don't wanna kiss me?"

"Are you going to tell your parents about Susan and Dave?" His voice was argumentative like he already knew the answer to his question.

I sighed, picking myself up off him and moving to his side.

"They don't need anything else to worry about right now," I muttered, looking down at the floor and twiddling my thumbs in my lap. "Micah's Dad was right. They can't take me. And he's going to take care of Landon."

"You should still tell your parents," Fox argued, trying to put his face in my line of vision. "So they know what's going on."

"Not right now, okay?" I said, looking up to meet his hard gaze.

"If you don't tell them, I will," he promised in an even tone.

We stared at each other in silence. I knew he wasn't lying when he said that. Fox was always truthful, at least to me.

I sent myself backwards, lying down on the bed and staring up at the ceiling. Fox was quick to follow. He laid on his side, reaching an arm out to pull me to him.

I couldn't stop the smile from sprouting on my face.

***

Walking into school the next morning was a strange experience. The heat of the gazes from my classmates burned into my skin, making sure I was aware of the stares I was receiving.

Trevor and Austin were standing at my locker by the time I arrived. Austin had an impressed look on his face as I walked toward them while Trevor looked like his usual friendly self.

"Why didn't you tell us you were dating Mr. Hottie himself, Fox Ridley?" Austin questioned with a wide, playful grin.

I sighed, stealing a glance at Trevor. He still looked like his usual self and that comforted me. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him.

"It didn't come up," I said with a shrug, moving to open my locker.

"Uh, you could've told us at the party," Austin countered, leaning against the locker next to mine. "When he came upstairs looking for you and stood *real* close."

"He didn't have to tell us, Austin," Trevor defended me with a pointed look.

I bit the inside of my cheek, my eyes staring down at my shoes before moving to Trevor.

"Look, Trev–" I started, letting out a breath. "I, uh, I didn't mean to keep it from you."

"It's okay–"

"It's just all so new and I didn't know who Fox was okay with knowing," I continued.

"Elijah, seriously," Trevor interjected, placing his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay. Fox deserved to come out in the way he wanted with you by his side."

Trevor smiled warmly at me while Austin was looking away from us.

"It's good that he has you," Trevor said kindly. "You're pretty great."

I chuckled, looking down at the floor. "I don't know about that."

Trevor laughed. "You could work on not being so self deprecating but other than that you're great."

"Where even is your boyfriend," Austin cut in, looking around the hall.

I glanced around and noticed some of the other hockey guys by their lockers, but Fox was nowhere to be found.

"I actually have no idea," I said as I continued my search for him.

A few moments later, Fox came storming down the hallway. His face was etched in an irritated frown and his cheeks were slightly red. Students in the hall parted to make a path for him as if he was blazing and creating the path himself. The glasses I adored sat on the bridge of his nose, his fingers roughly pushing them up as he made his way over to me.

"What's the matter?" I asked, my eyebrows raised as I took in his appearance.

Fox looked slightly disheveled, but the look was obviously good on him.

"I'm having the fucking worst morning of my life," he complained, pushing his glasses up again.

Austin had a sly smile on his face as he watched the two of us while Trevor looked as if he was figuring out if he should leave or stay.

"What happened?" I questioned.

"First of all I dropped my fucking contact on the floor and couldn't find it and realized I don't have any left," he started, his voice loud and snapping.

"Then," he continued. "My car wouldn't start and *no one* was home to give me a ride. Mom went to work early, Dad left last night for a business trip, Robin was already working, I have no idea where Raven is."

"So you had to take the bus?" I guessed. I was met by a glare from my boyfriend.

"No, the bus had already left!" he responded, his tone growing even more irritated. "So I had to wake Wren up to give me a ride and suffer through a car ride with him and he tried talking to me."

"Why didn't you just call me?" I asked, quirking my head to the side. "Josh and I could've picked you up."

"Because it's out of your way to come to my house then back to the school," he answered. "And now he has to pick me up after school so I can go order more contacts."

I let out a small laugh. "Maybe it's not such a bad thing to spend time with your brother."

He only responded with a glare.

Trevor cleared throat, gaining our attention. Fox's eyes widened slightly like he hadn't even realized Trevor and Austin were standing there.

"I'm really happy for you, Fox," Trevor said with an easy smile. "You should come to GSA when hockey is over."

"Oh, uh, thanks," Fox stuttered, giving Trevor a tight lipped smile. "Maybe I will."

"You guys are definitely the hottest couple in the school," Austin added with a laugh. "Although, the straight guys would probably say it's Lexa and Nadia."

I was surprised to hear Fox laugh at that. He seemed to relax a little bit, and for that, I was grateful. I didn't want him to be uncomfortable around my friends.

My eyes widened when I saw Josh walking toward us, but his eyes were only focused on Trevor.

"Hey," Josh called out, gaining the group's attention. "Can I talk to you, Trevor?"

Trevor's mouth gaped slightly and he silently nodded, following Josh down the hall.

"What the hell was that about?" Austin asked, a look of confusion on his face.

"Nothing," Fox and I said at the same time.

"Yeah, that's not suspicious at all," Austin sarcastically responded.

"I gotta go to my locker," Fox said, turning toward me and pecking me on the lips before rushing off.

I was left stunned at his public display of affection, my mouth parted as I watched him leave.

Austin groaned. "You guys are so hot."

I shook my head, laughing lightly as I playfully shoved him.

***

The locker room after school was silent as the team sat and waited for our coaches to talk to us. In the days after the tournament, they had spent their time in meetings with the league and the school board, figuring out what sort of consequences we would have to face.

Coach Silva and Coach Merton finally emerged from the office, coming to stand in front of all of us.

"I'm going to keep this short and simple," Coach Silva announced, looking around at each of us. "The principal has thankfully decided to leave the disciplinary actions to the league so this will not go on any of your school records."

The tension in the room relaxed at that. Some of the guys couldn't afford to have even more added onto their records.

"The league has decided that this team has to forfeit the next five games," he continued which caused an uproar of complaints. "That's all I could negotiate it down for."

"What about the other team?" Fox asked in a hard tone.

"They will forfeit six games," Coach Silva answered.

Fox scoffed, shaking his head and crossing his arms over his chest.

"They started it and had one of their coaches encouraging it and they only get one more game?" Fox spat. "That's bullshit."

"It is what it is," Coach Silva replied with a sigh. "We can't do anything about it now."

"This school is also banned from the tournament for the next two years," Coach Merton added. "Not that it matters to most of you since you're seniors."

"We should be grateful that your principal didn't decide to end our season despite what the league said," Coach Silva continued. "So let's just look at the positives. We will continue practicing tomorrow. We're done for today."

Murmurs of disappointment spread throughout the room. Fox looked frustrated, his face etched in a frown and his jaw tightly set. Ian looked down as he sat on the other side of me.

"This is going to fucking ruin me," he muttered, rubbing his forehead.

"It'll be fine," I tried to assure him. "We'll lose some momentum but we can still make it to the playoffs."

Ian shook his head. "Having to forfeit five games means that scouts won't even come near us."

I hadn't even thought of that.

"I don't get a scholarship, I don't go to college," Ian said in a low tone.

"Hey," Fox interjected, grabbing our attention. "You're going to college so shut up."

"You shut up," Ian snapped, leaning over me to yell at Fox. "My mom wanted to pull me off the team because of this. I had to remind her that I pay for it so she can't do shit."

"You're right, she can't do shit," Fox shot back.

I tried leaning back as far as I could while the two argued on either side of me.

"I can't afford to play anywhere without a scholarship, Fox," Ian said, his eyes narrowed. "It's my only way out of that fucking house and I can't do it."

"We'll figure it out," Fox replied in a low tone.

Ian sad back, a distant look on his face. He stood up and left the locker room without another word.

"Is everything okay with him?" I asked, concerned as I watched Ian leave. "He seemed fine on New Year's eve."

"That's because he was drunk," Fox said, standing up and heaving his backpack over his shoulder. "Ian's only ever that happy drunk."

"Is he okay?" I repeated, standing up with him.

"He'll be fine," Fox said with a nod as we started walking out of the locker room. "He's all doom and gloom at any inconvenience."

I decided to take Fox's word for it for now. Ian rarely let me see glimpses into his personal life, but when he did, it always ended up confusing me more.

Josh wasn't at the car when Fox and and I made it out to the parking lot.

The person who was leaning on our car caused my stomach to drop and the color to drain from my face.

**

Hi everyone thanks for reading!

So I think I underestimated the amount of chapters this would take in my outline. I could possibly go one or two more chapters over what I anticipated but we'll see how it goes.

Also, a lot of people have been asking me if I plan to write another book after this one is finished. The answer is: yes. I'm always writing new books at the same time I'm posting books. Right now I'm currently drafting two books, both of which I'm really excited about but one of them I'm trying really hard to draft because I think you guys will be more excited about it than my other one. My drafting process takes a lot of time before I'm ready to start posting chapters and neither book is anywhere near ready to start posting. It takes a long time but it's also the reason why I'm able to update once a week. So I will probably be taking a break from posting after I finish this book, but it will be because I'm working on a draft that I can start posting.

Anyway, what did everyone think of the chapter? What did you think about Dan apologizing and Elijah deciding not to tell his parents about Susan and Dave? What about Josh confessing to his parents? And the interaction with Austin, Trevor, and Fox? Did you expect the consequences from the hockey league about the fight? What about Ian? And who do you think is waiting for Elijah at the car?

46

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Landon looked furious as he stormed over to where I stopped in my tracks. His breathing was heavy and his nostrils flared angrily. He was on a mission and it seemed like my face was about to be the target of his fist.

"Landon..." I trailed in a wary tone, holding my hands out in front of me.

"Shut the fuck up," he spat, Fox moving to stand in front of me as Landon stopped before us.

His harsh glare cut through me and I froze in place.

"You're *ruining* my life!" Landon seethed, coming closer so that he was almost chest to chest with Fox.

"Back off," Fox said, more calm than I expected.

"You thought telling the Hanson's about me was a good fucking idea?" Landon continued, ignoring Fox who was trying to get him to back up.

"I thought they could help," I said in a small voice.

"There's nothing to help!" Landon exclaimed, throwing his hands up. "You should've kept your mouth shut!"

"Hey," Fox sharply interjected. "We're just trying to help you, show a little appreciation."

"I don't need help from faggots," Landon spat with narrowed eyes.

Even though he was spitting insults at us, I couldn't find it in me to be angry with him. He was deeply closeted and I didn't even want to think about how much self-hatred his parents had instilled in him.

"You seriously think anyone can change my parents' minds?" Landon continued. "You just made it worse!"

Landon stepped closer, causing Fox to back us up a few steps.

"You really need to back off," Fox warned in a stern tone.

"I'm sick of you stepping in and trying to be a fucking hero," Landon hissed, shoving Fox backwards so he knocked into me.

Fox's shoulders tensed and I could tell he was starting to lose his patience. Landon shoved him again but Fox didn't retaliate. It wasn't until Landon shoved him harder to the point where he stumbled that Fox started to defend himself.

Landon was about to throw a punch Fox's way and before I could step in to stop it, someone else did.

Wren has sprinted up out of nowhere and restrained Landon, holding him back from his brother.

"You need to leave," Wren said in an even tone as he continued holding Landon back.

"Get the fuck off me," Landon seethed, pulling himself out of Wren's grip.

Landon's scowl landed on me as if he wanted to kill me on the spot.

" *You*, " Landon spat, pointing at me like he wished his finger was knife that could slice through my skin. "Stay the fuck out of my life."

With that, he stomped off, leaving us speechless in his wake. I let out a breath, finally feeling like I could unfreeze from the shock of the situation.

"Is that the guy that attacked you at the tournament?" Wren asked his brother.

Fox just wordlessly nodded, glancing toward me.

"Come on," he said, motioning me to follow him. "I'm not leaving you out here to wait for Josh while Landon could still be around."

Without even thinking about it, I followed behind Fox to Wren's car. Wren wasn't far behind us, but he was still obviously stunned from the previous situation, his care for his brother showing through his concerned expression.

I climbed into the backseat, sending Josh a text that I would be with Fox, while Fox and Wren got in the front. Wren wordlessly started the car and began the drive to our destination.

I couldn't help but start to doubt myself. Maybe Landon had been right. Maybe I was just making everything worse for him by getting involved. Dark clouds formed in my mind as I thought of what he might have to endure because of me.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed the car had stopped until Fox turned to face me, his eyebrows knitted together.

"I just have to go order contacts," Fox told me. "I'll be right back."

I nodded as he got out of the car and headed into the building in front of us, leaving Wren and me alone.

"Why was that guy trying to start something with Fox?" Wren asked, his head facing forward.

His voice was so even and calm, like this was just another casual conversation.

"It doesn't matter," I mumbled, leaning my head back on the seat.

Wren scoffed, still looking straight ahead. "He looked like he wanted to kill him."

"If you're so concerned, talk to Fox about it," I spat, my eyes darting to the back of his head.

Before any more words were exchanged between us, Fox exited the building and made his way back to the car. He opened the door and leaned in but didn't get in the seat.

"My prescription is too old so I need an eye exam," Fox told us with a sigh. "They had a cancellation so they can do it in like half an hour."

I got out of the car, causing Fox to stand to his full height and lean on the open door.

"I take it you're coming inside?" Fox asked, an amused look on his face.

Wren stepped out of the car after us. "No point in sitting around in the car," he said.

"Right..." Fox trailed off, grabbing my hand and leading us into the building and over to the waiting area.

I sat between the brothers as Wren picked up a random magazine and started looking through the pages. We sat in silence for a few moments, the only sounds being the flipping of pages and phones ringing.

"Should we tell the Hanson's about Landon?" Fox whispered, leaning close to my ear.

"I don't know," I replied in a hushed tone. "Maybe they already know he's not happy."

Fox drummed his fingers on the armrest between our chairs, looking lost in thought as he stared down toward the floor.

"I hate him," Fox admitted after a few moments. "But I had internalized homophobia like that before. Maybe not as bad but I did." He kept his voice quiet, so not even Wren would be able to hear.

I nodded, placing my hand over his and stopping his movements.

"I feel so helpless," I confessed with a sigh. "Like, if he truly believes he needs to be 'fixed,' there's nothing we can do to change his mind."

"Especially since we can't get near him without him trying to throw punches," Fox added, letting out a frustrated breath.

Wren slapping down the magazine he was holding turned our attention toward him. He ran his thumb through the others before picking out another one and skimming through the pages like he had before.

Fox's gazed stayed on his brother moments after mine had turned to his face. He looked at him with a thoughtful expression, something I wasn't used to seeing when it concerned Fox and Wren. It wasn't a look of annoyance or hatred, but rather an expression that seemed like Fox was trying to figure something out about his brother.

Maybe it was progress. Or, maybe I was reading into it too far.

"Fox Ridley?" A young woman in a lab coat, holding a clipboard, called out.

Fox stood with a sigh, his hand lingering against mine for a moment before he followed the woman into one of the exam rooms.

Once Fox was out of sight, Wren slapped down the magazine he was holding and secured his stare on me.

"What were you two talking about?" Wren asked, tilting his head to the side with curiosity.

"None of your business," I replied, picking up the magazine he had just put down and starting to flip through it.

Wren scoffed, ripping it out of my hands. "You two aren't quiet. I heard you."

"Then why are you asking?"

"What's going on with that Landon kid?" Wren asked, ignoring my words.

"It doesn't matter," I snapped.

"It does when this isn't even the first time he's tried to assault him," Wren countered. "You're my only insight to Fox, so you have to tell me."

"I'm *not* ," I denied with a pointed look. "Don't put me in that position, Wren."

Being between the two brothers was the last thing I wanted.

Wren sighed, leaning back in his seat and looking straight ahead as he brought his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Look," I started, turning in my seat to face him. "I'll talk to Fox and tell him you're feeling guilty–"

"I'm not guilty," Wren sharply cut me off, snapping his head to look at me.

I gave him a knowing look, raising my eyebrows in suspicion. He was guilty; he just didn't want to admit it.

"I'm tired of being at odds with him like we're ten years old," he countered. "There's a difference."

"Whatever, it doesn't matter that much," I replied, turning away from him to look straight ahead. "I'll talk to him."

"Fine."

"You can say 'thank you' you know," I said in a sarcastic tone, glancing at Wren through the corner of my eye.

Wren didn't bother acknowledging what I said with a response. Instead, we sat in silence for a little while longer until Fox had finished his appointment and ordered new contact lenses.

Fox adjusted his glasses on his face as he motioned for the two of us to get up and follow him out of the building.

"Have I ever mentioned how much I hate eye exams?" Fox asked as we slid into the car.

"You hate a lot of things," I reminded him.

He turned glare at me as Wren started the car and maneuvered out of the parking lot. I responded with a sheepish grin, causing Fox to shake his head and turn around.

"Bring us to Elijah's house," Fox instructed his brother.

Wren didn't say anything as he drove the way to my house. The two of us shared a look when he dropped us off in my driveway but no words were spoken.

The door was surprisingly locked when we got up to the house. Ava was usually home by now but I supposed she could've stayed after school or gone to a friend's house. What was more puzzling was that Josh hadn't made it home yet. And I hadn't heard from him when I texted to let him know I was leaving with Fox, though I knew he read it.

"House to ourselves?" Fox asked with a smirk.

I chuckled at him, shutting the door behind us. "It's almost like you planned it."

"Maybe things just work out for me," he said, pushing me back against the door and beginning to kiss up my neck.

I tilted my head to the side, giving Fox better access as his lips continued their journey on my skin.

As Fox's lips burned my skin, all thoughts of the day left me. I didn't think about Landon and his outburst or my mother and Dave's plans. All that mattered was Fox and the time we had together now.

Fox brought his lips to mine and my hands found their way to the back of his neck, pulling on the strands of hair at the base.

I bit down lightly on his bottom lip, eliciting a low groan from him as he tightened his hold on my hip.

"Wanna go upstairs?" Fox asked breathlessly against my lips.

I answered him with a brief kiss before pulling away and dragging him up to my bedroom. Fox straddled my hips on my bed, cupping my cheeks in his hands as I placed my mouth back on his.

My hands traveled to Fox's hips, holding him close to me. I let my fingers play with his belt loops, tugging on them.

Fox pulled away, but kept his face close to mine. His glasses fogged slightly before almost instantly clearing. My attraction to him was apparent as I gazed at him, biting down on my bottom lip.

He sent me a coy smile, knowing exactly how I felt about the way he looked.

His glasses were my weakness, I would admit it.

Fox brought his hands to my shoulders, leaning me back so that I was completely reclined while he sat up on my hips. He quickly pulled his shirt off, his glasses becoming disrupted on his face before he straightened them out. Then he helped me tug off my shirt, kissing my chest as soon as it was discarded onto the floor.

He left marks up my chest and on my collarbone before brushing his lips against my ear as he spoke.

"It's your turn," he said in a low, raspy voice and I knew exactly what he meant.

"Are you sure you want to?" I asked him, unable to keep a smile from blossoming on my face.

"Yes," he instantly replied, bringing his lips to my jaw. "I want to."

Those were the only words that needed to be spoken for us to switch positions and continue what we started.

***

After we had finished, Fox and I made our way downstairs to the living room. Fox was flat on his back on the couch while I sat on top of him.

"You're sitting on me like I'm not going to be sore later," Fox said, resting his hands on my thighs that were on either side of his hips.

"You'll live," I replied with a wide grin, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

Fox grabbed my head before I could sit back up, pulling my face to his to give me a long kiss on the lips.

I situated myself into a more comfortable position as I deepened the kiss.

I continued kissing him until a throat clearing caused me to spring upward.

My eyes met Dad's, and they widened in panic. I hadn't even thought about how he would feel about Fox and I being here alone. He didn't even want us up in my bedroom.

Mindy stood beside him, an amused expression decorating her face.

Fox practically shoved me off of him so that he could sit up, feigning innocence like we hadn't just been caught.

"I'm just going to pretend like I didn't see that," Dad said with a light smile, walking past the couch. "And like I don't see what's on your neck, Elijah Christopher."

Fox groaned in embarrassment while Mindy chuckled and followed Dad into the kitchen.

"If your Dad didn't hate me before, he's going to hate me now," Fox grumbled, putting his face in his hands.

I rolled my eyes, lightly shoving Fox's shoulder. "Stop it."

Fox sighed and glanced down at his phone after it buzzed in his pocket, then looked back up at me.

"I have to go," he said, staggering a bit as he stood from the couch. "Ian is staying the night."

"Is everything okay?" I asked with concern, standing up beside him.

Fox shrugged with a solemn expression. "He just needs to get away from his house sometimes."

I didn't want to let my mind wander to the absolute worst, but I couldn't help it. Even though Ian wasn't all that friendly, I had grown fond of him during my time here and I couldn't bear the thought of him being stuck in an abusive home.

"Can you drive me home?" Fox asked in a low tone, motioning toward the front door.

I nodded, heading to the kitchen to grab Dad's keys so I could borrow his car and letting him know where I was headed. Fox and I made our way outside and into the car, starting toward his house.

"So..." I trailed, briefly looking over to Fox as I drove out of the neighborhood.

"I can't talk about Ian with you and keep your eyes on the road," was his instant response.

I scoffed. "I wasn't going to bring up Ian. I know you can't spread his business."

"So what were you going to say?"

I paused for a moment, debating on whether I should actually start this conversation.

"I was going to bring up Wren," I admitted.

Fox sighed, throwing his head back onto the headrest.

"Don't be dramatic," I said, lightly swatting at him.

"Both hands on the wheel," he demanded, grabbing my hand and placing it back on the steering wheel. "Why the hell do you want to talk about Wren?"

"Because he seems like he's really guilty," I started. "And wants to make up with you but doesn't know how."

"And he's too fucking prideful to talk to me about it?" Fox was obviously annoyed, like any other time his brother was brought up.

"You know you're cold to him," I retorted, raising my eyebrows. "If he tried talking to you, you'd brush him off."

Fox didn't say anything, but I took that as him admitting I was right.

"Aren't you tired of feuding with him?" I asked in a soft tone.

"I guess," Fox admitted with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair. "But I can't just flip a switch and get along with him."

"Maybe you should spend time with him," I suggested which just earned me a scoff.

"Just because I don't want to fight with him doesn't mean I want to be best buddies," he said.

"Okay," I replied as I neared his house. "But he cares about you. I can tell."

Fox didn't respond as I pulled up to his house, but the look on his face said a lot. I wouldn't care so much about helping Wren out if I didn't think it would be a good thing for Fox if the two of them got along. The thoughtful, contemplating look on his face told me that his rocky relationship with his brother was something that weighed down on him.

Fox looked up at his house and then back to me, parting his lips slightly.

"If Landon tries showing up at your house or anything..." Fox started, causing me to shake my head.

"Don't worry about it," I stopped him. "Go see Ian. He needs you."

Fox nodded before leaning in and leaving a slow kiss on my lips.

"I—" Fox stopped short, his eyes widening. "I, uh, I'll see you tomorrow."

He quickly got out of the car and scurried up to his house, looking back one last time before going inside.

I sat in the car for a few more minutes, shocked at Fox's rushed departure.

Was he going to say he loved me?

I couldn't push the thought out of my head. Love seemed so unattainable, but I couldn't help but wonder if the feelings of belonging, safety, and pure happiness I felt with Fox, was all that made up what love was.

It felt too soon. But at the same time, it felt right.

**

Thank you for reading! Sorry the update is late but better late than never.

For those of you who don't know, for work I run a customer service desk and yesterday I had gotten someone else to cover the desk so I could be the person outside keeping track of how many people went inside the store and I got SO MUCH WRITING DONE on my phone. I wrote most of this chapter while I was at work. It was the best.

Anyway what did you think of the chapter? Most of you guessed it but were any of you surprised about Landon being at the car? Or what he was there for? What about Wren stepping in and his wish to stop feuding with Fox? What did you think about Fox and Elijah's alone time and the car ride to Fox's house?

47

I had somehow ended up at Micah's house before returning home from Fox's. Thoughts of what happened with Landon earlier in the day pushed me to feel like I had to discuss it with the Hanson's. Or at the very least, I had to discuss it with Micah.

Landon's outburst wasn't all that surprising looking back on it, but I was still curious as to what had led to it. Mr. Hanson must have confronted Landon's father, but I wondered what had actually happened.

Without much more thought, I heaved myself out of the driver's seat and made my way up to the Hanson household and knocked on the door. Mrs. Hanson was the one to answer.

"Elijah," she said, surprise evident on her face. "Is everything alright?"

"Is Micah home?" I asked, looking past her into the house.

She nodded, moving aside so I could step into the house.

"He's in his room," Mrs. Hanson told me. "You can go on up."

It had been a while since I had ascended these steps. Growing up, I had spent a lot of time here and it seemed as if another memory popped into my head with every step I took. Although my relationship with Micah would never be the same, I couldn't help but feel nostalgic as I walked down the familiar hall to his bedroom.

I knocked twice on the door and paused briefly before landing three more swift knocks. This was how Micah and I always knocked on each other's doors when we were friends, so we would always know who was on the other side.

"Elijah?" Micah answered as he whipped open the bedroom door.

"Can we talk?" I asked to which Micah nodded, allowing me into his room and shutting the door behind us.

"What's going on?" Micah asked with concern lacing his tone as he sat down on his bed.

I sighed, running my fingers through my hair.

"Landon came to my school today," I confessed, Micah's eyes widening. "And he was angry. Really angry."

"My dad talked to his parents," he told me. "He told them that if they weren't happy having a gay son, then he could come live with us instead of going with Dave and Susan."

Micah's words surprised me. I didn't know what I thought Mr. Hanson would do for Landon, but I didn't expect him to offer up his home.

"He'd really let him stay here?" I wondered, sitting down beside Micah on the bed.

He nodded, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. "He's doing for Landon what he wished he did for you."

I stared at him in silence.

"He feels guilty for not sticking up for you when Susan kicked you out," Micah continued, looking down at his lap. "We all do."

I looked forward, leaning back on my hands. "That's not important right now. What's important is that we may have made things worse for Landon."

"My dad still thinks he can convince them to leave Landon with us," he replied, causing me to turn my gaze toward him. "I'm thinking convincing Landon to stay with us will be the hard part."

I nodded in agreement. "Probably."

"Things will work out," Micah assured me.

We sat in silence for a few moments. I hadn't thought about how weird it was to be sitting alone with Micah in his bedroom until our conversation ceased. The last time I had been in here was months ago, though it felt like a lifetime.

"How are things at your new church?" I asked, breaking the tension that was nearly suffocating us in the room.

Micah cleared his throat. "It's good. I really like it. It's a lot more of a tight-knit community."

"Are any of the guys mad you left?"

He shrugged. "I only talk to a few of them now and we're still friends. Landon's buddies are being their usual obnoxious selves and they obviously have no idea what's actually going on with Landon."

I just nodded.

"Things have been kinda weird since the tournament," Micah continued. "A lot of the guys are at odds because some of them want to go along with Landon while others don't like that he was trying to mess with you and blame him for getting us suspended."

It was surprising to hear that any of my old teammates cared about Landon messing with me. They had their time to show any amount of care for me and when it really mattered, they didn't do it.

"How has Landon been at school?" I wondered.

"A little distant but it's not noticeable to most people," Micah replied. "My dad will take care of him. You don't have to worry."

We didn't say much else before I decided to head back to my house where I noticed Josh had finally made it home.

"That took you a while," Dad commented when I walked inside, handing him back his keys.

"We just talked for a little bit," I mumbled, suddenly feeling insecure about any marks left by Fox visible on my skin.

"Is that's what it's called nowadays?" Dad teased, hanging his keys up on the hook above the microwave. "I'm just teasing you, Elijah."

I let out a light laugh. "I know. It's still embarrassing."

"Mindy and I were thinking of doing a family night tomorrow," Dad started. "You should invite Fox."

I nodded, letting a smile quirk up on my lips.

Afterward, I dragged myself up the stairs to Josh's bedroom. There was a reason he was MIA after our hockey meeting and I was determined to find out what it was. I placed three rapid knocks on the door and waited for his answer before letting myself in the room.

Josh sat on his bed, leaning up against the headboard, as he intently focused on a video game displayed on his TV. I had rarely ever gone into Josh's room for anything and I couldn't even remember the last time I was in here.

I sat down beside him on the bed, leaning over to press the pause button on his controller. It was only then that he turned to look at me.

"Where did you go after school?" I asked him.

"Just hung out," he vaguely answered, causing me to raise my eyebrows at him in question.

Josh looked away from me briefly before bringing his eyes back to my face and letting out a long sigh, putting his controller down next to him.

"Fine," he started. "I hung out with Trevor."

My eyes widened at the revelation and excitement coursed through me at his confession.

"So you guys are good now?" I asked, my tone upbeat.

"Working on it," Josh replied with a soft smile.

"And you guys hung out...? Like—"

"Just hung out," Josh cut me off. "As friends."

I was about to ask him more questions when Ava barged into the room and threw herself down on the bed in front of us.

"Are you guys hanging out with out me?" she wondered with a glare.

"Now we're not," I answered, earning myself a kick in the leg from my sister.

"You better be nice to me," she warned. "Because I can start making fun of you for the vampire bites on your neck."

Her words caused me to instinctively bring my hand up to my neck, causing both of my siblings to laugh at me.

"Make it two player," Ava commanded as she leaned over to grab Josh's other controller from his nightstand.

The three of us spent the rest of the night on Josh's bed as Ava kicked his ass at whatever game they were playing.

***

The next day at school, I didn't see Fox until he limped his way into English class with Ian by his side. Then he sat in his usual spot in the back of the room, placing his hand on my shoulder as he walked by.

"Holy fuck," Nadia excitedly whispered as she watched Fox go by us. "You fucking topped him?"

"Sh!" I hushed her, holding my finger to my lips.

"I knew one of them had to be gay," Lexa commented with a sly smile. "And you snagged the hottest one."

Nadia scowled at her girlfriend who held her hands up in defense while I shook my head at her.

"Hey, just because I'm gay doesn't mean I can't tell that he's hot," Lexa defended.

As Nadia and Lexa started chatting, I heard laughter coming from the back of the room. I turned to see the hockey guys chuckling among themselves, lightly shoving Fox while he sat there with a glare on his face.

I could only imagine the things they were saying to him about the obvious pain he was in this morning. It didn't take a genius to figure out what the pain was from.

As soon as class ended, Fox was quick to meet up with me at my seat, earning amused stares from Nadia and Lexa.

"I'm going to kill those assholes," Fox hissed, sending a scowl back to where our friends were laughing at him.

Even Ian, who I was worried would be in a sour mood today, was chuckling as he stood up from his seat.

Before I could say anything, Fox grabbed my hand and led me out the classroom, leaving our friends behind.

"Is your car fixed yet?" I wondered, remembering he had been late again this morning.

Fox shook his head. "My dad had to order a battery for it because the store was out. Wren let me take his car today."

"He let you take it?" I asked, astonishment clear in my voice.

"Yeah, you know how he's been being weirdly nice lately," Fox replied, still holding onto my hand as we walked down the hall. "Plus I think Robin is off from work today so they can just take his car if they do anything."

Fox and I walked together until we had to split up to go to our respective classes. Before departing, Fox placed a chaste kiss on my lips then walked in the other direction.

It wasn't until lunchtime when I saw him again, coming up to where I sat at the GSA table.

"Can I sit here? Those idiots are still annoying the shit out of me," Fox said, sitting down beside me and placing his tray down on the table.

None of the other GSA kids had made it to the table yet, but I didn't have to sit alone for long since Fox was now accompanying me.

"You get annoyed easily," I reminded him, opening up my water bottle and taking a sip.

He rolled his eyes. "I know, but they've been extra annoying today."

Claudia rushed over to the table once she saw that Fox and I were sitting there.

"So when's our double date?" she asked with a sweet smile, sitting across from us and resting her elbows on the table with her cheeks in her hands.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Fox asked her, his eyebrows pinching together.

"You, Elijah," Claudia answered, gesturing toward us. "Me, Holly. Date. Together."

"No," Fox denied, shaking his head.

Claudia sat down in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest and staring Fox down like she was waiting for him to give in. He wasn't budging, turning to face me and effectively ignoring Claudia's outburst.

"Come on, Fox!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

"I can't get away from annoying people today, no matter how hard I try," Fox said to me, causing me to chuckle as I glanced at Claudia's irritated glare.

I figured he would eventually give into Claudia's request if she bugged him enough about it. Despite being exes, the two of them still cared deeply for each other and considered each other close friends.

Claudia let the topic go when Holly made her way to the table and stole all of her attention.

"Uh, oh, now we've got three couples at this table," Austin said as he sat down with his lunch, Trevor and Johnny sitting on either side of him. "Though, this one I wouldn't mind seeing make out."

" *Austin* ," Johnny complained.

It still surprised me that Fox found Austin amusing as he sat beside me, laughing at his words. I felt warmth in my chest at the thought of Fox becoming more and more comfortable with his sexuality.

"Is everyone treating you two alright?" Trevor asked, ignoring Austin's crude remarks.

"Other than some staring, I think it's gone pretty well," I replied, looking to Fox for confirmation.

Fox nodded. "Besides our own team being annoying about it, it's been fine."

Trevor laughed. "Josh was telling me that the whole team was super shocked when you came out at the tournament.

Not very subtly, Fox's eyebrows shot up on his forehead as he turned to give me a look due to Trevor's mention of Josh. I lightly kicked my boyfriend under the table.

"It was a heat of the moment thing," I said, trying to distract from Fox's hiss in pain. "No one was really expecting it."

With that, the conversation drifted to something else and lunch seemed as though it was over as soon as it started.

***

Finally being able to get back on the ice felt amazing, even though the coaches were making practice as grueling as possible. They said it was to keep us fresh since we wouldn't be able to compete for five games, but I was sure they just liked seeing us suffer.

We were all growing tired from the drills we had been running, and Fox was getting increasingly frustrated when his glasses kept fogging up in his helmet.

The coaches gathered us at center ice toward the end of practice, Alex out of breath and leaning on Fox for support. Fox appeared to be too tired to even bother shoving him off.

"Alright boys. I think you've had enough for today," Coach Silva announced, glancing around at all of us. "We'll have a lighter practice tomorrow. You guys can go."

"Lighter practice my ass," Jude complained from behind me as we made our way to the locker room.

Fox and I stood next to each other at our lockers, getting ready to change out of our gear when Ryan came up behind us.

"Bruins game at my house Friday?" Ryan asked, a hand on each of our shoulders.

"We have to go out with Claudia and Holly," Fox grumbled, sitting down to pull his skates off.

Fox had told me at the start of practice that Claudia had ended up convincing him to go on the double date in one of the classes they had together after lunch.

"Come over for the Sunday matinee then," Ryan responded with a grin, patting Fox on the shoulder and walking away.

"You're still coming over tonight, right?" I asked Fox, sitting down beside him. "For family night."

Fox glanced up at me, his lips quirking up slightly. "Yes, I'm coming."

I grinned at him, then turned my gaze down to my lap until Ian plopped down beside me and shook the bench. He didn't say anything as Fox and I stared at him while he took off his equipment.

Once he had the lower half of his equipment off, Ian stood up and took off his jersey, pads, and under shirt. That was when I noticed the nasty red mark on his arm.

"Woah, are you okay?" I asked him without thinking.

"Elijah," Fox whispered, placing his hand on my arm and shaking his head at me.

Ian sported a surprised expression as he shared a glance with Fox, as if he was shocked Fox hadn't told me anything about why he had gone over the night before.

"I'm fine," Ian replied, his expression turning impassive. "My mom smacked me with her stupid iron. She claims she didn't know it was still hot."

My eyes bulged at his words. The burn on his arm was considerably large, looking like it must be throbbing.

"Wipe the concern off your face, Ellis," Ian said in an even tone. "I'm fine. I'm not being abused. She's just a little annoying lady with a temper."

With that, he turned to face his locker and finished undressing before grabbing a towel and heading to the showers.

My eyes slowly drifted to Fox, the shock still clear on his face.

"Don't ask," he said, shaking his head.

After we finished getting dressed and showering, I went with Fox for the ride to my house after throwing my hockey bag in the trunk of mine and Josh's car.

"So you didn't really tell me what went on with Wren after I dropped you off," I pointed out as we left the school's parking lot.

"Not much really," Fox replied, resting his right arm on the center console. "We just talked a bit after I made sure Ian was settled."

I let out a hum and nodded my head.

"It wasn't really anything," Fox continued. "I was just saying how I didn't know how I was going to get to and from school and he told me to just use his car."

I smiled over at him. "That's progress."

Fox scoffed, his eyebrows furrowing. "If that's what you want to call it."

We pulled up to my house a few minutes later. Josh had beat us there, but he was just getting out of the car as we pulled up.

Dad and Mindy were in the living room with their dinner plates, watching TV when we walked in.

"I made a new chicken alfredo recipe I found," Dad said when he saw us all. "Please eat it. It made so much."

We didn't have to be told twice. After the practice we just went through, I knew we were all starving.

The three of us finished our dinners at the kitchen table and went into the living room where Mindy, Dad, and Ava sat waiting for us. I had no idea what this family activity would be, but I hoped it wouldn't be yoga again.

"Teams of two, everyone!" Mindy announced, clapping her hands together.

"That's not fair," Ava complained, crossing her arms over her chest. "You're going to stick me with Josh."

"Why don't you want to be on a team with me?" Josh asked, looking slightly offended.

"You don't have the competitive edge that Elijah and I do," she answered, causing me to chuckle.

Josh shook his head at her.

The teams were obvious: Mindy and Dad, Fox and me, Josh and Ava.

"We're going to be doing charades," Mindy said excitedly, a wide grin on her face.

I tried to show enthusiasm as I shared a look with Fox. He was willing to do just about anything to ensure my family didn't hate him, even if it meant pretending to be excited about playing a game.

It turned out that charades could get a lot more competitive than I thought. Ava had already screamed at Josh for not getting that she was acting out opening a present. Dad and Mindy were currently in the lead since Dad had guessed correctly that Mindy was acting out reading a book. That one was too easy, and Ava complained about that too.

Fox was currently acting something out for me to guess and sending me a glare every time I said the wrong thing. Our time ran out and Fox threw his hands up in the air in frustration.

"It was Serena Williams!" he yelled, coming back to his spot beside me. "How did you not guess that? You didn't even guess tennis!"

"Maybe you weren't acting it out good enough," I retorted, earning another glare from my boyfriend.

"Maybe I should've teamed up with Fox," Ava commented, Fox nodding in agreement.

I sighed, pulling my phone out of my pocket to check the time, only to see I had nine missed calls from my mother.

"She's calling you again?" Fox asked in a hushed tone.

I just nodded. Fox looked at me with a hard expression and glanced over at my Dad, silently urging me to tell him what was going on.

"Is everything alright?" Dad asked when he noticed the sudden mood change.

I took a deep breath, turning my phone around so he could see the screen. Dad's face darkened for a moment before going back to normal.

"Let's just forget about that for now and enjoy the night," Dad suggested with a smile.

Fox glanced back to me as if he was silently trying to communicate something.

We took Dad's advice and continued the night, placing my mother in the back of my mind.

I couldn't wait for the day that she would stop showing up in my life.

**

Again, sorry this is late.

We are getting kinda close to the end. I'm thinking two or three more chapters and an Epilogue. Just need to tie some things up and end it at this point. I'm sad it's ending but also excited to have another book completed.

Let me know your thoughts on the chapter! How did you feel about Elijah going to Micah's at the beginning? What about Fox sitting with the GSA kids and agreeing to a double date with Claudia and Holly? And the family night? And Elijah showing his dad the calls from his mom instead of trying to hide it?

Thanks for reading!

48

Waking up alone in Fox's bed was not something I was used to. Before opening my eyes, I felt around the mattress, grasping the comforter when I realized the bed was empty.

Fox and I had gone straight to his house after school on Friday afternoon. Since we had the house to ourselves, we ended up in his bedroom and I must have fallen asleep soon after that.

I crawled out of the bed, picking my clothes up off the floor and putting them on before heading downstairs where I found Fox and Wren sitting on the couch together, watching TV. The two of them sat side by side, not saying anything as they kept their focus on the television.

My lips quirked up as I watched the two of them. It may not have seemed like much, but the fact that they were actually doing something together, despite how mundane, was progress for the brothers. They weren't fighting or sitting on opposite sides of the room. Instead, they sat together in comfortable silence.

"Hey," I called out, walking over to the couch to sit next to Fox. He turned to face me and instantly smiled.

"Finally decided to get your ass out of my bed?" he joked with a grin.

I leaned into him, grabbing his arm and putting it around me. I couldn't get enough of being in his embrace. It felt like I had spent so much of my life without feeling comfortable with this sort of affection, because I had never gotten it. Now, it was all I wanted.

"You left me there," I mumbled, lying down so I could rest my head on his chest.

Fox wrapped his arm around me even tighter, putting his hand on the top of my head to play with my hair.

"Baby," he said, my eyes shooting up at him. "I did not say that as a pet name, I was calling you a baby," he quickly clarified.

I scoffed at his words. "I gave *you* a pet name."

He looked down at me, his brows furrowing in confusion. "No, you didn't."

I raised my eyebrows. " *Foxy.* "

"Sh!" Fox covered my mouth with his hand, but he was too late. Wren was already laughing from his spot on the couch.

"Oh my God," Wren chuckled, shaking his head.

"Elijah," Fox whined, taking his hand off my mouth. I just laughed at his embarrassment. "That is *not* a pet name."

"It, quite literally, is," Wren pointed out, standing from the couch.

Fox glared up at his brother, but it wasn't like he usually did. They were having playful, harmless banter. It made me wonder what had happened while I was asleep that made them act civil with one another.

Wren pulled his car keys out of his pocket and handed them over to Fox.

"Take my car on your date," he said as if he wasn't giving Fox an option. "Just don't wreck it."

"I'm not you, I'll be fine," Fox retorted, grabbing the keys.

Wren rolled his eyes but didn't comment as he left the room to go upstairs. It was then that I noticed it was almost seven o'clock, otherwise known as the time we were supposed to meet up with Claudia and Holly.

"Why didn't you wake me up earlier? We have to go," I said, standing up from the couch and pulling him with me.

"Because you were worn out," Fox replied with a smirk, earning a light punch in the shoulder from me. "And you look so cute when you're

sleeping."

I rolled my eyes. "You weren't even in there, so it's not like you were looking at me."

"I was for a little bit," he said, starting toward the front door.

I followed behind him as we walked out to Wren's car. Fox was more than frustrated that the new battery for his car hadn't come in yet, but he would hopefully have it by tomorrow.

"Wren and I talked," Fox admitted as he drove down the road, putting an end to the silence in the car.

"I figured," I replied, resting my arm next to his on the center console.

It was surprising that he was the one that brought it up, but I wasn't going to complain. I was too nosy for my own good, so I was dying to know what happened between the brothers.

Fox smiled over at me briefly before putting his eyes back on the road. The smile was almost mischievous, like he knew something I didn't.

"Is there anything you want to own up to?" he asked in a playful tone.

The streetlights illuminated his face and his skin glowed, making it hard to focus on anything he said while I looked at him.

"I don't think so..." I trailed, confusion clouding my mind. I thought back on anything I had done that would require me telling it to Fox, and came up with nothing.

"So you didn't talk to Wren about me?" he wondered, though it didn't sound accusatory. His tone was still easy and light.

It seemed like all of my conversations with Wren had revolved around Fox; he was the only thing the two of us had in common.

"Whenever I talk to Wren, it's about you," I admitted with raised eyebrows. "I told him I'd talk to you about making amends, but only because I thought you would want that."

I didn't know the extent of how damaged the relationship between the two of them was, but I knew it took a toll on Fox. I had spent so much time resenting Josh, and I knew how badly that made me feel. Fox and Wren's resentment went far deeper and much longer.

"Well, we talked," Fox told me, stopping at a red light. "For a while."

I smiled over at him as the green light shined into the car and he started driving again.

"It's a start," he continued with a sigh. "We're not completely fixed, but he apologized."

"He did?" I asked, my eyebrows lifting on my forehead.

That was the most surprising thing of all. Wren was hellbent on not feeling guilty or the need to apologize. I would've paid to hear the words come out of his mouth.

Fox nodded. "I did too. We've both done things."

That was the last we talked of Wren for the time being. I knew Fox wouldn't want to get into all the details. It must have been an incredibly candid, vulnerable conversation if the brothers had finally reached an understanding with one another.

Fox pulled up to the restaurant and memories automatically flooded my head of the night I had come here with Micah a few weeks ago. That night I was broken and fragile, on the verge of having a mental breakdown. Tonight, I would make better memories .

Claudia and Holly were already sitting across from each other at a booth near the front of the restaurant. As we made our way to them, Claudia quickly stood up from her seat and exaggeratedly waved us over.

"Sit down, Claud," Fox hissed as we reached the table, sitting next to her and grabbing her arm to pull Claudia down beside him. "You're so embarrassing."

"I think she's funny," Holly giggled as I sat down beside her, bumping her hip with mine.

"I honestly expected you guys to be later," Claudia admitted with a wide grin. "Fox is always on 'Fox time' so..."

"Shut up," Fox replied, rolling his eyes and picking up his menu.

"Elijah," Holly called to me, holding her phone out in front of us. "Get in my snapchat for Austin, he's jealous he wasn't invited."

I chuckled as Holly snapped a picture of the two of us, sending it on its way to Austin.

"I thought since you picked the restaurant you would already know what you wanted," Claudia said, leaning over Fox's shoulder to see his menu.

"You picked?" I asked him, grabbing my own menu.

Fox nodded. "That was the deal."

"He only agreed because I told him he could pick where we go," Claudia continued. "It didn't have to be dinner, but it sure as hell couldn't be ice skating."

"I thought you had gotten better at that?" I questioned with a chuckle.

Holly shook her head. "I still have to pull her around, but I don't mind."

Fox didn't seem too interested in the conversation, his eyes wandering over his menu to look around the room. I turned my head to follow his line of vision to see Ian standing at a table not too far from us, taking an order.

I looked back at Fox and raised my eyebrows at him, only for him to shake his head and put the menu down.

"So what's going on with hockey?" Claudia asked, gaining Fox's attention.

"Suspended for five games," Fox answered in a bored tone. "We already missed two this week."

His eyes drifted over to Ian as he walked by the table, looking as if he was trying to avoid all eye contact with us.

"That doesn't seem fair," Holly said with a frown. "It sounded like the other team started it."

"They did," I told her. "But it is what it is. They can't do nothing."

Our server came to the table and took our orders while Fox still followed Ian with his eyes. It was now obvious the reason he chose this restaurant; he wanted to spy on Ian.

"I'm gonna head to the bathroom," Fox suddenly said, standing up from the table and walking away.

"What's his problem?" Claudia asked me, pointing her thumb in the direction he went, which was not the same direction as the bathrooms.

"No idea..." I trailed as I watched him walk away and eventually disappear.

"I'm so glad you two finally got together," Claudia commented with a content sigh.

Holly nodded in agreement and looked at me with a smile.

I mustered out a quick "thanks" but my mind was still on Fox and what exactly he was doing. After a few more moments, I excused myself from the table to go find him, telling the girls I was headed to the bathroom.

It didn't take long for me to find Fox in the back, standing in front of Ian, who was backed into a corner. Fox was speaking in a hushed tone but looked as if he wanted to yell.

"You're not fucking going home tonight," Fox hissed in Ian's face.

"I don't need you to fucking baby me," Ian spat, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ian's gaze darted to me as he avoided eye contact with Fox.

"Come get your fucking boyfriend," Ian snapped at me, causing Fox to turn around. "He's being annoying."

I didn't know what to say. I felt like I had walked in on a very private conversation.

"You're being stupid!" Fox hissed, turning back to Ian and throwing his hands up in the air.

"I'm not staying at your house every time something happens!" Ian retorted. "And I can't deal with you right now."

"Then I'll stay at your house with you," Fox replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No, *I can't deal with you* ," Ian said in a low tone.

Fox was about to respond before I cut him off.

"You can stay at my place tonight if you need to," I suggest, gaining the attention of both boys. "Hang out with me and Josh."

"If that'll get Fox to leave me the fuck alone," Ian muttered, pushing past Fox and returning to work.

Fox and I watched him walk away while Fox came to stand by me.

"Thanks," Fox mumbled. "I was really worried about him going home tonight."

"Did you just choose this restaurant so you could spy on Ian?" I asked him with raised eyebrows, though I already knew the answer.

Fox gave me a sheepish smile before leading me back to the table with Claudia and Holly.

"Was there a party in the bathroom?" Claudia asked with a chuckle as we sat back down at the table.

"There was a line," Fox lied in a dull tone.

"You're so full of shit," Claudia retorted.

"Not anymore."

That comment earned Fox a look of disgust and a shove in the shoulder from Claudia.

Our food came not too long after that, Claudia insisting on taking photos of our meals before we ate them.

Ian's shift had ended before we finished our meal and Fox kept an eye out to make sure he didn't leave the restaurant. I didn't know what had Fox so stressed about Ian going home, but it was obviously something serious.

Once we finished our meals and paid the bill, we said our goodbyes to Claudia and Holly then made our way over to where Ian sat alone at a table.

"Come on," Fox said to Ian as we passed him, walking ahead of both of us.

Ian glared at the back of Fox's head as he slammed his hands down on the table and shoved himself up.

"Why are you two so annoyed with each other?" I asked Ian as we walked together. He stared straight ahead, his fiery eyes still scowling at Fox.

"He's fucking nosy," Ian spat.

Fox just cared about him. That was the thing about Fox; he seemed bitter and cold, but he cared a lot about the people closest to him.

I didn't reply to Ian as we made our way to the car. Ian found his way to the backseat and slammed the door shut behind him. The tension in the car was thick on the way to the house, none of us speaking.

Ian didn't say anything when we finally pulled up to my house. He just got out of the car and started making his way to the front door.

"Hopefully he cools down," Fox said, causing me to take my eyes off Ian's retreating figure and turn to him. "If he doesn't, don't take it personal. He just gets weird about his home life."

I nodded, biting down on my bottom lip. "We'll be fine."

I leaned in, kissing Fox's lips briefly before getting out of the car and following Ian into my house.

Ian wordlessly followed me up to my room, standing in the doorway as I sat down on my bed across from him.

"You can stay in here or down on the couch," I told him, breaking the silence.

"I should've just went home," Ian said with a scoff. "But Fox wouldn't leave me the hell alone. You don't need to babysit me."

"I'm not babysitting you," I replied with an eye roll. "We just don't want you going home to a dangerous situation."

Ian and I weren't the closest of friends, but I still didn't want to send him home to where he could potentially be harmed.

"It's not dangerous," Ian retorted, irritation clear in his tone.

"I know you don't see it that way, but being physically harmed is abuse," I told him.

Ian's eyes darkened as he leaned against the door frame. He crossed his arms over his chest, directing his narrowed eyes into mine.

"Remember when I was out with Micah that one night and you watched us to make sure nothing bad happened and took me home later?" I reminded him, standing up from the bed to be level with him.

That night was the first time I had felt close to Ian. It was the first time I had seen us as actual friends.

"Yeah?" he responded in an annoyed voice, like he couldn't tell where I was going with this.

"That's like what Fox does for you and what I'm doing right now," I continued, looking straight into his dark eyes. "So just hang out here tonight. We don't even have to talk, we can just stare at the wall if you want."

I swore I saw Ian crack a smile at that, but it vanished just as soon as it appeared.

A moment later, Josh and Trevor appeared behind Ian in my doorway. Ian and I shared looks of shock.

"Hey Trev," I greeted with a wave as Ian finally entered my room.

"Hey!" Trevor replied with a wide grin.

"Where's Fox?" Josh asked, looking around the room with a confused expression.

"Home," I told him.

Josh gave Ian and I a strange look, but didn't comment further. I was sure he wanted to ask questions and only didn't because he knew I would ask about him and Trevor.

We didn't stay in my bedroom for long as my fathers yells caused Josh and I to rush down the stairs and into the kitchen where Dad was having a heated conversation over the phone. Mindy sat at the table with a startled expression as Dad paced the floor.

"I swear to God, Susan, I will file a restraining order!" Dad exclaimed, his face turning red. "Leave my son alone!"

Dad and I shared eye contact, tears pooling in his as he listened to whatever my mother said on the phone. His jaw clenched as he pressed his lips tightly together while my mouth gaped slightly. The startled look on my face caused Dad to hang up the phone and place it down on the table before making his way to me.

"Did you know your mother and Dave planned to take you with them to Pennsylvania?" Dad asked in a shaky tone, placing his hands on my shoulders.

My breath hitched and all I could do was nod, Dad letting out a frustrated sigh and looking down at the floor briefly.

"You should've told me," he said in a low tone.

"Dad," I choked out. "They can't take me."

Dad sighed again, looking over to Mindy and Josh before bringing his gaze back to mine.

"Your mother is getting a lawyer involved," Dad told me in an even voice, keeping his hands locked on my shoulders.

"She can't do that," I immediately denied, shaking my head. "I'm eighteen. She can't force me to go anywhere."

"I know, I know," Dad replied, pulling me into a hug. "But I don't know what exactly her lawyer is going to be able to do, since, even though you're eighteen, you're still a high school student."

I rested my head on his shoulder, suddenly feeling tired at the thought of my mother somehow being able to get me back into her grasp.

"Then we get a lawyer involved," Mindy said in a hard tone, standing from the table. "I'm sick of this and I'm sick of her trying to tear Elijah away from us."

I picked my head up and Dad nodded in agreement.

"I don't care how much it costs," Mindy continued. "We're putting an end to this. Now."

I made my way back up to my room a few moments later, Josh following closely behind me.

"Everything is going to end up fine," Josh assured me, patting my shoulder as I headed into my room.

I nodded at him and entered my bedroom where Ian and Trevor stood in awkward silence. I would have laughed at the two of them if I wasn't feeling so emotionally spent. Josh motioned for Trevor to follow him out of the room and left Ian and I alone.

"I won't even ask what that was all about," Ian said after Josh had shut the door.

"Just my mom trying to control me," I said with a heavy sigh, throwing myself down on my bed and staring up at the ceiling.

"The same mom that threw you out for being gay?" Ian asked, sitting beside me.

"The very same one," I replied.

Ian shook his head, looking down at me. "I guess we both have fucked up moms."

I snorted out a laugh. "I guess so."

It wasn't long before I started dozing off, the emotions from what had happened wearing me down. Ian had turned on my TV and started flipping through the channels as he sat beside me.

Just as I was about to fall asleep, my phone started ringing with Fox's name showing up on the caller ID.

"Hey Foxy," I answered, hearing Ian let out a snort at the pet name.

"Elijah, it's Wren," Wren said, his voice sounding rushed.

I sat up on the bed, my brows knitting together in confusion. "Wren? Is everything okay? Where's Fox?"

"Fox is in the hospital."

**

Hi all! Thanks for reading!

I know how much you all *love* cliffhangers, so I decided to give you one. As a treat :)

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! What did you think about Fox and Wren's interactions at the beginning of the chapter? And Fox admitting they apologized to each other? What did you think about the double date with Claudia and Holly? And Ian's drama being added to the mix? What about Dan and Mindy finding out about Susan and Dave's plans? And the cliffhanger? Predictions about what happened to Fox?

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My bones shuddered as my heart pounded against my chest so hard I swore I could see the jumps through my shirt. I gripped the passenger's side door, my knuckles straining and turning white while the tension in the car made it hard to breathe.

The surroundings blurred together as Josh sped down the road. Ian and Trevor sat in the backseat, none of us saying anything to lighten the mood.

Images of Fox lying in a hospital bed invaded my thoughts. Wren didn't know a lot about what exactly had happened or what condition he was in. He just knew that he was injured. The lack of details did nothing to ease my nerves. Not knowing was the worst part, fearing the worst case scenario.

I didn't want to think about what condition he was in. He could be bruised and broken or left hurt and alone before someone had gotten to him.

My eyes stung as I choked on sobs. Josh sent me a worried glance but I kept my eyes staring straight ahead. I fought the urge to look at the clock, too worried about how long it was taking us to get there.

Tires screeching brought me back to reality, taking in my surroundings as Josh took a sharp turn into the hospital parking lot. I barely waited for him to stop the car before getting out and rushing through the doors.

I fumbled with my phone as I quickly tried to call Wren back to find out his whereabouts, and more importantly, Fox's. The phone only rang a couple times before Wren showed up from around a corner. I hung up the phone and made my way over to him.

"Where's Fox?" I instantly asked, Josh, Trevor, and Ian following behind me.

"They're doing some tests," Wren said. "We haven't been able to see him yet."

"What kind of tests?" I asked, frustration evident in my tone.

"Some x-rays I think and a concussion screening," Wren replied. "He's conscious, we're hoping it's nothing too serious. You can come wait with us."

At his words, it seemed like I could finally breathe again. The air pushed out of my lungs and the squeeze on my heart loosened as I followed Wren over to the waiting area outside Fox's room. His whole family was already sitting and waiting for their chance to see him.

Fox's mom was the first person I made eye contact with and she sent me a sympathetic look. I was suddenly conscious of the tears I was still holding in my eyes.

"Elijah," Vanessa called out, motioning for me to go beside her. "He's going to be okay. The doctor already came and told us."

I let out a sigh of relief as Vanessa put a comforting arm around me.

"She also told us that he was being irritable and asked us if that was normal," Leo added from beside his wife. "And I said 'Yep, that's our boy.'"

"Do you know what happened?" I asked his parents in a small voice, laughing slightly at Leo's words.

"He was on the side of the road with the car when he called us," Vanessa began. "And when we got to him he was pretty banged up but he hadn't crashed the car. We were too worried about getting him to the hospital so we didn't question him too much."

I was left confused at her explanation but I didn't question her further. I just had to wait to see Fox. He would explain everything.

The rest of the siblings spoke quietly with each other while Josh, Ian, and Trevor stood up against the wall. I made eye contact with Ian, who kept his face impassive. He was never one to show emotions, and tonight was no exception.

Waiting was agonizing, my worry for him making it impossible for me to stand still. I had never felt this jittery in my life. My heart felt like it was crawling up my throat, blocking any words from coming out as I stood there. Every time a doctor walked by, I hoped it was his, until finally, it was.

"Wow, there are a lot of you," the doctor commented before turning to Vanessa and Leo. "Fox is still conscious. We did some x-rays and nothing is broken but we're still waiting on the results of the concussion test. You can go on in and see him. I'll be back as soon as we have the results."

After the doctor walked away, Vanessa and Leo motioned for me to follow them into the room. I didn't hesitate to take them up on their offer.

When I saw Fox, my whole world stopped. He was sitting up in the bed, his legs hanging over the side with his face etched in a frown. I began to get too used to seeing bruising on his handsome face, though this wasn't worse than last time. He flinched a bit when he moved, obvious that his injuries were more than what I could see.

He squinted at me and I realized his glasses were missing from his face.

"Elijah," Fox called out, moving to stand up.

"Stay sitting," I commanded, rushing over to him and lightly forcing him back down.

"I'm fine," he said with an eye roll. "I can stand."

"Can you tell us what happened?" Leo cut in, standing behind me with his arms crossed over his chest.

Fox sighed, holding eye contact with his father. I began to see where Fox got his stubbornness from. They continued their staring contest until Fox finally gave in and let out a heavy breath.

"Some guys ran me off the road," he started. "So I got out to yell at them and all four of them got out of their car and started attacking me."

My blood seemed to stop in my veins, my face draining of any color as I though of what this implied. Somehow, my old team was involved.

"Did you get a good look at them?" Vanessa asked. "So we can talk to the police?"

"I know exactly who they were," Fox replied, earning looks of surprise from his parents. "They're from the Catholic school hockey team."

"Did they say anything to you?" I asked him, sitting down beside him on the bed and taking his hand in mine.

Fox seemed to be avoiding eye contact with me until I squeezed his hand. He looked at me briefly and then down at our intertwined hands.

"They said something about it being a warning, that I was gonna have it worse next time if I kept you from leaving," Fox admitted in a sullen tone.

"Dave put them up to it," I said in an empty tone, my grip on his hand immediately loosening.

"He must think that I'm what's keeping you here," Fox reasoned, grasping back onto my hand. "Not the fact that he's completely fucking deranged."

"Was Landon there?" I questioned, afraid of what the answer might be.

Fox shook his head and for the first time tonight, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Who is Dave and why is he trying to make you leave?" Leo questioned, earning a smack in the arm from his wife.

I let Fox explain the situation to them, not having the energy to do it myself.

"We're gonna see if the doctors can get an officer in here so you can make a statement," Vanessa told her son.

With that, his parents left the room, leaving the two of us sitting hand in hand, our legs leaning on each other's.

"This is really bad," I spoke up in a shaky voice.

"It's gonna be fine," Fox assured me.

"No, the police are not going to know Dave sent them," I rushed out. "They're going to deny everything."

"Don't worry about it right now," Fox calmly responded, letting go of my hand to wrap his arm around me and wincing as he did so.

"Are the doctors sure you don't have any broken ribs?" I asked, pulling away slightly. "You're in pain."

"They didn't break my ribs," Fox asserted with narrow eyes, irritation in his tone. "They're weak. They couldn't even break a twig."

"You're *hurt* ."

"That's only because there were four of them and one of me," he retorted. "I could take any of them in a fair fucking fight."

I glared at him, the rollercoaster of emotions I felt tonight taking a toll on me.

"You're not taking this seriously."

Fox sighed. "Look, *I'm sorry* , but I can't mope around and pout about shit I can't change. They attacked me, Dave was probably in on it, whatever."

I sent him a look of disbelief before he continued.

"We get over it and focus on getting Dave and those goons out of our lives for good," Fox said, a serious expression on his face.

A small smile made its way onto my lips.

"How are you so brave all the time?" I asked, leaning closer to him.

Fox scoffed. "I'm not."

"You are to me."

I finished leaning in and connected our lips. Our kiss didn't last long and we had to break apart when Colt waltzed into the room.

"This is what you guys have been doing in here?" Colt asked, his *Switch* in hand.

"None of your business," Fox answered his brother as Colt sat down in the chair beside his bed and started playing a game.

Fawn and Raven walked in a few minutes later, each with a coffee in hand.

"You didn't even think to ask if I wanted anything?" Fox questioned his sisters with a glare. "I'm the one that's been in this hell hole for hours."

"Robin will get you something," Raven said, sitting down at the foot of the bed. "They went off with your friends."

Fox raised his eyebrows at me.

"Josh, Ian, and Trevor are here," I told him.

"Trevor?"

"He was with Josh," I replied. "I don't know the details."

Fox smirked but didn't say anything else about the two of them.

"So who the hell beat you up?" Fawn asked, taking a sip of her coffee. "I can go rough them up."

"I don't doubt it," Fox responded.

"Seriously though. What the hell?" Raven added, turning to face us.

Fox didn't explain the specifics, but he ran through what happened after he had left my house.

"You fucking scared us!" Robin boomed was he walked in the room, Wren following behind him.

"Whatever. What did you bring me?"

"I brought the peace offering of a redbull," Robin said, handing it over to Fox.

Fox snatched it out of his brother's hands and immediately opened the drink.

Wren stood against the wall next to where Colt sat, his posture rigid and tense.

I told Fox I was going to step out of the room for a moment, giving the siblings some alone time. When I got back to the hallway, Josh, Ian, and Trevor were sitting on the bench across from the room.

"How is he?" Josh asked, standing from the bench. Ian stared at me intently, waiting for my answer.

"He's fine," I said, leaning up against the wall. "He's in some pain but he's acting like his normal self."

"So he's being bitchy?" Ian asked with a scoff, his face no longer blank. It was like once he knew Fox was okay, he was back to being irritated with him.

"Kinda."

The doctor came back down the hall, walking with Vanessa and Leo. The three of them entered the room, leaving us outside.

We waited around a while, Fox giving his statement to the police, until he was finally being discharged. He surprisingly didn't have a concussion, which he boasted about to his family.

"How are you man?" Josh asked Fox when he came out of the room.

"I'm *fine* ," he assured him, looking around at all of us. "You guys didn't have to come here."

"Well, Elijah made it sound like you were fucking dead so..." Ian snapped, his hands in his pockets as he stood next to Josh.

Fox turned to me with a confused expression.

"Wren called me," I clarified. "All he knew was that you were at the hospital and that's all he told me. So I thought the worst."

Fox nodded in understanding, putting his hand on my back.

"I'm glad you're alright Fox," Trevor added with a smile.

Fox returned the gesture. "Thanks."

We all left the hospital with the tension lifted from the air. I was relieved Fox wasn't badly injured, but the thought of why this happened, because of me, was haunting me.

Fox noticed I was distant and he brought his face in front of mine when we got out to the parking lot.

"Do you want to come spend the night with me?" he asked, concern etched onto his face.

I was the one that was supposed to be concerned with him, not the other way around. It felt like he was holding me together and without him I would break into pieces.

"Ian's staying at my place," I answered, my tone quiet and raspy.

There was nothing more that I wanted than to sleep with Fox wrapped in my arms tonight, but I couldn't abandon Ian. Even if he most likely wouldn't speak to me for the rest of the night, I wanted to be there in case he needed to.

"He can still stay at your house with Josh, right?" Fox wondered, looking over to where Josh, Ian, and Trevor stood at our car. "He doesn't need a babysitter, just a place to sleep."

I pondered on his offer, glancing over at the group at our car and knowing if I looked at Fox he could convince me to do anything.

I walked over to the group after telling Fox I needed to go talk to them. Their conversation ceased when I reached them.

"So I'll see you tomorrow?" Josh asked as soon as he saw me.

"Uh..."

I glanced around at the three of them.

"I just assumed you'd be staying at Fox's," Josh added.

I made eye contact with Ian, who then gave me an irritated scowl and crossed his arms.

" *Go* , Ellis," Ian snapped. "Now I can sleep in your bed instead of the fucking floor."

I waited a moment before nodding.

"Goodnight, Elijah," Trevor said with a small wave.

After saying goodbye to them, I made my way back to where Fox waited for me at his parents' car. He wrapped his arm around me, giving me a brief kiss on the cheek before getting into the car.

The ride back to his house was quiet, the only noises coming from Colt's game he was playing in the back of the SUV and the tires rolling on the pavement.

Once we were back at the house, Fox led me upstairs.

"I didn't wreck your car," Fox called out to Wren, who was about to open his bedroom door.

Wren slowly turned his head and let out a short laugh as he opened the door.

"I know you didn't," he said, closing himself in his room.

Fox opened his own door and I followed him inside.

"I need to take a shower," he said, heading to his dresser to grab new clothes. "I'm covered in blood and dirt."

I watched him closely, noticing his wince as he moved to remove his shirt.

"Fox," I said, astonished at the bruises littering his abdomen. "Are you sure you don't have a broken rib or something?"

"The doctors said no," he replied, trying to hide his discomfort as he removed the rest of his clothes.

My eyes watered as I looked at him, knowing he was hurt because of me.

"Hey," he said, coming in front of me and putting both hands on my cheeks. "Don't do that." He kissed my cheek under my eye, where a tear was about to fall.

I didn't dare voice my thoughts to him. He would only try to convince me otherwise but I knew it was the truth. Dave had orchestrated this because he knew hurting Fox would affect me.

"Go lie down," Fox said, leading me to his bed. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

Fox exited the room, leaving me to my thoughts. I buried myself in the covers, taking deep breaths. Thoughts of Fox being beaten ran rampant in my mind. He had to suffer because he was with me and that caused a squeeze in my heart.

He didn't take long in the shower and I didn't know whether or not I should have been grateful for that.

Fox got into the bed and reached for me. Before he could wrap his arms around me, I turned around and wrapped mine around him. All I wanted was to hold him close.

He settled into my hold, letting out a content sigh as I kissed the back of his neck.

This was all I needed at the moment, to have him close and safe in my embrace.

***

"So you want me to go beat 'em up?" Alex asked, standing up and throwing some punches in the air.

"Sit down before you hurt yourself," Fox retorted.

Some of the guys had decided to come over to Fox's house the next day after hearing he had been in the hospital. Fox didn't like everyone making a fuss about him, but he didn't complain *too* much when they showed up.

"I could take them," Alex said, sitting back down between Ryan and Jude.

Jude scoffed in disbelief, shaking his head at him.

"You're not going to do anything to them," Fox asserted in a stern tone. "We're gonna let the police deal with it and keep ourselves out of trouble."

"That's no fun," Alex complained, slouching his shoulders.

I couldn't even force myself to become engaged in their conversation. My mind was too busy guilting me about what had happened to Fox.

"Fox is right," Ryan agreed. "Better them get in trouble than us."

"I'd like to go knock at least one of them out though," Jude added. "Imagine if they had really hurt you."

"Well, they didn't so we can stop talking about it," Fox replied, his voice dismissive.

He knew I felt guilty, I could tell by the way he looked at me.

Josh showed up a moment later with an iced coffee in hand.

"Where's Ian?" Fox asked.

"I had to drop him off at work," Josh answered, sitting down next to me as I leaned lightly into Fox's side.

The group continued their conversations while I zoned out.

I couldn't keep myself from thinking that if I had never gotten together with Fox, he would've never been targeted like this. He had always been worried about being disrespected and treated differently after coming out, and that was exactly what he had gotten for being with me. He was stuck in the crossfire, getting mistreated because of problems people had with me.

He didn't deserve the abuse and he wouldn't be getting it if it wasn't for me.

"Hey," Fox whispered, nudging my side and causing my eyes to gaze at him. "Where's your head at right now?"

I hadn't even noticed that the only ones left in the room were Fox, Josh, and I. I had been so lost in my head that I hadn't seen the others leave.

"Sorry," I muttered.

Fox's eyes were filled with concern.

"Are you staying here?" Josh asked me, standing up from his seat and pulling the car keys out of his pocket.

"Can you wait for me in the car?" I asked.

Josh gave me a strange look but nodded anyway, leaving Fox and I alone. I sat up, slightly distancing myself from Fox.

"I think we should break up," I said as soon as Josh was gone.

"What the hell, Elijah?" Fox questioned, his mouth gaping in shock at my sudden words.

"If you're not with me, you won't be a target for Dave," I reasoned, standing up in front of him.

"I think it's too late for that," Fox said, standing from his seat. "You're not seriously breaking up with me right now?"

"Fox," I sighed, running my shaking hand through my hair. "You wouldn't be hurt right now if you weren't with me."

"I don't care about that!" he shot back, his eyes bulging.

"But I do!" I retorted, my voice cracking as water built up in my eyes. "All I do is bring you trouble."

"That's not true," he denied, his voice right as he shook his head.

A tear spilled out of my eye and I quickly swiped it away.

"How can you not hate me for this?" I asked in a small voice.

"I could *never* hate you," Fox asserted, staring into my eyes as he grasped onto my shoulders. "This isn't your fault."

"Fox, I–" my voice gave out as I choked on a sob. "I can't let you get hurt because of me."

"And I can't let you dump me just because something shitty happened," Fox replied.

"But it's not just this," I told him, letting out a shaky breath. "Landon has gone after you before because of Dave. He won't stop as long as you're with

me."

"I don't care," Fox said, still holding tightly on my shoulders. "You're just feeling guilty and overwhelmed right now. Don't do this."

His jaw was tightly set like he was holding back his emotions.

"You should care," I immediately responded.

"Elijah, we're not breaking up," Fox said in a stern tone. "I know you don't really want that and neither do I so there's no point."

I stared at him with sad eyes while he seemed to be looking into my soul. It felt like he could read my every thought.

"Fox, I don't know what to do," I confessed, more tears dripping from my eyes.

"I don't either, but whatever we do, it's together," he said, leaning his forehead onto mine.

Our skin touching felt like the most natural thing in the world. He made it so I didn't feel like a stranger in my own life.

With him, everything made sense. Everything was right.

**

Hi all! Thanks for reading. I was going to leave another cliffhanger but I thought two weeks in a row would be too mean.

I want to warn all of you next chapter will be the LAST CHAPTER before the Epilogue. We're wrapping things up within the next two weeks and then this book will be over.

So what did you think of the chapter? Were any of your guesses right about what happened to Fox? What about Elijah trying to break up with Fox? Do you understand why he feels the way he feels? Do you have any ideas about how the book will end?

50

Control was never something I was graced with in my life. It always seemed as if some invisible force was steering me, giving me the illusion of free will while keeping me on the same path. It was like I was a side character in my own life, everything happening to me being a result of others around me. Choices were never mine.

Until I came out, everything was planned for me by my mother. Then on that fateful day, I took charge and changed the path. That one act of defiance was the only control I had in my life up until that point. But as soon as I did that, the control was gone again.

Emptiness wasn't a new feeling to me, but it had been a while since I felt it.

My body was hollow as I laid on my side, staring at the wall from my bed that night. A warm tear swam down my face and dripped on my pillow as my insides shriveled up.

I was breaking down.

One thought consumed me to the point where I didn't want to move. The thought that everything bad that had happened to Fox after he came out was because of me was what haunted me. He had gotten accosted and abused when, before I had come into his life, he never had been treated that way.

When your mind chooses to focus on the one thing that could eat you alive, it made you feel helpless. No matter what I did, my mind wouldn't leave that thought. That was when I knew I still had no control in my life. I couldn't even control my own mind.

Fox's comforting words only helped as he was speaking them to me. Once we were apart, the words left me and I was back to drowning in my guilt.

He deserved better, a lot better than what he got for being with me.

The ride back from Fox's house was silent. Even if Josh had tried to talk to me, I didn't know it. I was too lost in my head to hear anything outside of it.

When my bedroom door opened, I didn't even turn to look and see who it was. They shut the door behind them, then walked around the bed and stood in front of me.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ian asked, his hands on his hips as he looked down at me with narrowed eyes.

I didn't answer, keeping my eyes glued to the wall. Ignoring Ian was working until he got down on a knee to put his face in front of mine.

"Should I get Josh?" he asked. Ian looked concerned, his mouth pulled down in a frown and his eyes softening.

"No," I drawled out in a low, raspy tone, my own voice sounding foreign to me.

"I feel like I need to do something but I don't know what," Ian admitted, continuing to stare at me with a wary expression. "I tried calling you to see if I could stay over, but you didn't answer."

"You don't have to ask," I told him, turning over to lie on my back.

Ian stood up, looking down at me with a hard expression, his eyes and mouth pinching on his face.

"What happened?" he asked. "Is it Fox?"

"Leave it alone, Ian," I muttered, staring straight up at the ceiling.

I wanted him to leave me alone, but I didn't voice that in fear of him leaving the house altogether and going back to his own.

"Well, are you just moping or are you actually going through something right now?" Ian questioned, sounding more irritated.

"I don't get into your business, you don't get into mine."

Ian scoffed, rolling his eyes at me and sitting down on the bed.

"You *know* my business," he started. "You know my mom hits me, and makes me pay for all of my own shit, and steals my money. That's my business and you already knew that."

I just ignored him, causing Ian to let out a heavy sigh at my lack of response.

"Your phone is going off," he said, picking it up off the nightstand.

"I don't care," I replied in a dull tone.

"It's Micah," he said, raising his eyebrows at me. "It looks like he's called you a couple times."

This caused me to sit up and take the phone out of Ian's hand. Micah would only call me with a real reason. It wouldn't just to be checking up on me or to talk about nothing. Him calling me meant something was going on.

"Hello?" I rushed to answer.

"Elijah, we have a bit of a situation," Micah told me, his voice sounding nervous.

"What's going on?"

I shared a look with Ian, who was staring at me in confusion.

"Landon just showed up at my house," he said. "Absolutely drunk."

I let out a long sigh, rubbing my temples with my thumb and forefinger.

"I don't know what to do with him," Micah continued. "He's just rambling and bumping into stuff."

"Are your parents home?"

"No," he said. "They went to his house tonight to talk with his parents. I don't want to call them in case his parents get angry that he came here."

I sighed again. "Can you get him to fall asleep somewhere?"

"I need you to help me," Micah pleaded. "Please, Elijah."

I leaned my head back on the wall and stared at the ceiling. I really couldn't just have tonight to wallow in self-pity. Something always had to happen.

"Fine," I said. "I'm on my way."

I hung up the phone as I got up from my bed, throwing a sweatshirt on over my shirt and sticking my phone in the pocket.

"What are you doing?" Ian asked, also getting up from the bed.

"I have to go," I said, grabbing my keys from my dresser. "You can stay here."

"Should you really be going anywhere right now?" he questioned, giving me a challenging stare. "You literally just looked like you were two seconds away from ending it all, and now you're rushing off somewhere?"

I walked out of my bedroom, Ian quickly following behind me.

"Would I be a good friend right now if I just let you walk off?" he asked, grabbing onto my arm to stop me.

We shared a look for a moment before I continued my way out to the car, Ian on my heels. He didn't even ask where we were headed when I started the car and began the journey to Micah's house. Ian sat stoic in the passenger's seat, resting his arm on the center console.

I pulled the car up to Micah's house, rolling the front tire over the curb before parking and rushing with Ian into the house. I didn't bother knocking before stepping inside and seeing Landon wandering around the living room in front of a bewildered Micah.

Micah's eyes found their way to me and Landon's quickly followed.

"What the hell is *he* doing here?" Landon asked, pointing toward me and taking a shaky step forward.

"Landon, come on," I said with a sigh, holding my arm out to him. "Let's get you upstairs so you can lie down."

"Don't touch me!" he screamed, stumbling backward and knocking into the mantle behind him.

"When did he get here?" I asked Micah, who still look stressed out beyond belief.

"About forty-five minutes ago?" Micah guessed, slightly lifting his shoulder.

Ian stood quietly behind me with his arms crossed over his chest, eyeing Landon as he glared at me.

"I'm sorry I called you—" Micah started.

"You called him?" Landon questioned loudly, shifting his glare to Micah.

"You were right here when I did," Micah reminded him.

I had seen Landon drunk many times, but never like this. He had always been a reckless drunk, but now he looked overly emotional and unhinged.

" *He* makes everything worse!" Landon exclaimed, gesturing toward me. "He's the reason I'm like this!"

"Landon just go to sleep," I pleaded, wanting nothing more than to be able to go back home.

"I can't sleep here! I leave tomorrow!"

His words caused the color to drain from my face and a sinking feeling in my stomach as dread consumed me. Dread that we had been too late to

protect him.

"Stay here," I commanded in a low tone. "Don't go home tomorrow, just stay here."

Landon laughed, tears streaking down his face but not from the laughter. His tears were sad while he laughed like he was mocking me.

"They'll come get me," he said, a broken look in his eyes. "They won't even let me pack my things. My parents just want to mail them to me to get me out of here as soon as possible."

His words were slow and slurred together, sadness sneaking its way into his tone.

"Just stay with me, Landon," Micah cut in with a look of concern. "We won't let them take you."

Landon laughed again. "You guys are acting like it's just so *easy* . Not all of us have parents and a hot as fuck boyfriend keeping them here."

I would've smiled at his remark about Fox if he didn't look so broken.

"There is nothing keeping me here," Landon continued, his voice softer.

He looked as if he was contemplating for a moment, looking down at the floor before he brought his eyes back up.

"And who says I want to stay here?" Landon asked, looking around at us. "Maybe I want to go and do this program and get better."

By the way his face drooped, I could tell even he didn't believe his words. Landon may have had a lot of internalized homophobia to work through, but he still didn't truly believe the lies his parents had fed him about his sexuality.

"You don't mean that," I mumbled sadly.

Landon looked down at the floor, his eyes becoming heavy. The tiredness on his face wasn't just from his need for sleep, but from having to put up with what he was going through.

He didn't say anything as he sat down on the floor, putting his head in his hands. Micah and I shared looks of bewilderment. Landon had never been one to show any type of weakness, but he was unraveling in front of us.

Micah cleared his throat, going over to Landon and kneeling down beside him, placing a comforting hand on his back.

"Let me take you to the guest room," Micah said in a low voice.

Landon didn't move as Micah gestured for me to help him get him up. He allowed us to bring him to his feet and lead him into the guest room upstairs while Ian stayed at the foot of the stairs.

Once we got Landon onto the bed, he turned his back to us and brought his knees up to his chest. My gaze lingered on him for a moment before following Micah out of the room and back down the stairs.

"Make sure he stays here," I said once we were back in the living room. "Don't let him go with them tomorrow."

Micah nodded, a worried expression on his face. "I'll try. I don't know if I'll be able to stop him if he actually wants to go."

I didn't say anything because I knew he was right. If Landon truly didn't want our help, we couldn't stop him. The sad part was I knew Landon didn't actually want to go, but he had at least somewhat convinced himself that he should.

"That was intense," Ian said once we were back in the car on the way to my house.

"Yeah," I responded in a sigh, my mind clouded with mental exhaustion.

My head hurt as I thought of the events of tonight. The last two days were overwhelming and all I wanted was for nothing to be going on in my life.

"So I," Ian started, stuttering slightly, "I, uh, I applied for some scholarships. I have scouts coming to some practices and games once we can play."

It seemed out of the blue that he was bringing this up, but I knew why he did it. He was taking my mind off of everything that has happened. Ian wasn't an overly emotional person, but he could read the emotions of others well.

"That's great, Ian," I said, trying to sound as enthusiastic as I could at the moment. I was truly happy for him and wished for him to succeed.

"Fox has been bugging me to do it," he mumbled, leaning his head against the window. "I think he wants me out of my mom's house more than I do."

I couldn't help but smile at that.

"He loves you," I said, glancing at Ian briefly.

He gave me a look that I couldn't quite decipher and nodded his head before I took my eyes off him.

I felt a little lighter by the time we got back to the house. I was able to calm down on the short ride home and talking to Ian helped dissipate the heavy feeling in my head.

When we entered the house and went up to my room, I didn't expect to find Fox sitting on my bed. My eyes widened when they landed on him and I couldn't help but let them linger on his injuries.

"I thought I broke up with you," I said, causing Fox to stand from the bed and roll his eyes at me.

"Shut up," he replied before looking over to Ian. "Is everything okay?" he asked him.

"You guys broke up?" Ian asked, ignoring Fox's question.

"No," Fox said at the same time I said, "Yes."

Fox glared at me, shaking his head.

"See, this is why I came over here," he started with a stern tone. "You left my house all sad looking and I knew you'd go back to thinking like this if I let you leave."

Ian looked increasingly uncomfortable as Fox and I shared glares.

"I'm going to let you two fight this out on your own," Ian said, backing away toward the door. "I'll just go bother Josh."

Ian shut the door behind him, leaving Fox and I standing across from each other in my room. Fox's eyes narrowed at me as I sat down on the bed.

"How did you even get here?" I asked, briefly looking down at my hands in my lap and then back up at him.

"Wren dropped me off," he answered. "He said he had somewhere to go anyway."

"Okay, so why are you here?"

"I already told you why," he said, rolling his eyes again. "You tend to overthink."

I felt bad about being cold toward him, but now that I was looking at his injuries again, all the thoughts of why this happened came flooding back. I knew he deserved better than this, yet he still wanted to be with me. He was checking on me while he was the injured one, and that made me feel useless.

"Dad and Mindy want me to go file a restraining order on Dave tomorrow," I told him. "Maybe you should too. And on the guys who hurt you."

I had talked to Dad and Mindy briefly when I had gotten home from Fox's. They noticed something was wrong but didn't push me to talk about it. The three of us planned to go in the morning to take care of the restraining order.

Fox walked over to the bed, sitting down beside me and tossing his arm around my shoulder to pull me against him.

"I think that's a good idea," Fox mumbled against my skin as he placed a kiss on my cheek.

"Foxy..." I whined, resting my head on his shoulder as he held me tighter. "I'm so tired of this."

"I know," he agreed, wrapping his other arm around me so that he hugged me to his side, placing kisses on my forehead.

He winced as I made contact with his stomach, and that caused me to jump away from him. I looked at Fox with sad eyes, my mouth pulling into a frown.

"Don't even start," he warned, a stern expression taking over his face. " *Yes* , I'm in pain. *No*, it's not the end of the world."

It was progress that he was even admitting to being in pain.

"Can we just go to sleep? I'm tired," Fox said, taking his glasses off and rubbing his bruised eye.

It was then that I noticed how *tired* he actually looked. He acted like nothing took a toll on him, but it did. He was exhausted.

I leaned in and connected our lips briefly in a kiss before standing up from the bed and changing into more comfortable clothes, leaving my shirt off.

Fox followed my lead, pulling his shirt off over his head and placing it on the nightstand next to his glasses, after folding it. It took all my willpower to keep my eyes away from the bruises that littered his abdomen.

"Can I borrow some pants?" he asked, looking up at me with a grin.

A small smile sprouted on my face as I pulled a pair of pants out of my dresser and handed them to him. Fox pulled his jeans off and stood up to put on the pants I brought him.

"They're a little tight," he said as I laughed at the way the pants hugged his body.

"At least your ass looks good," I said with a chuckle, wrapping my arms around his torso and pulling him down on the bed and with me.

"Like always," he added, raising his eyebrows.

I hummed in agreement, pecking his lips.

Fox brought his hand to the back of my head and pulled me back to him to connect our lips again. He kissed me slowly and patiently, savoring the feeling. When we were like this, it was like there was nothing else around us.

We slowly pulled away, staring into each other's eyes and sharing a sort of unspoken dialogue. Just by the look he gave me, I could feel his love.

I hugged Fox closer to me, allowing him to lay his head on my chest as the two of us fell asleep.

***

I woke up to Fox detangling himself from my arms. I propped myself up on my elbow, watching him as he threw his shirt on and fixed his glasses on his face.

"You're leaving?" I asked with a yawn.

Fox turned, his eyes looking up and down my body, the comforter resting just below my hips.

"It makes it hard to when you're looking like that," he said, his lips quirking upward slightly.

"Then come back to bed."

"Can't, sweetheart, Wren's picking me up to go get the battery for my car," Fox replied, kneeling on the bed to give me a kiss.

I gave him a look of disgust at the nickname, but didn't comment on it.

As he tried to back away, I pulled him by the front of his shirt and planted my lips on his again. Fox's lips melted into mine as I kept my grip on his shirt, him cupping my face in his hand.

I started to deepen the kiss, biting down on his lip and letting my tongue enter his mouth. A surprised noise left his throat as he pulled away.

"You're trying to make it impossible for me to leave," he accused with raised eyebrows.

"Maybe," I said with a grin.

"Well we have to stop that before your dad comes up here and catches us. *Again.* "

Just as he said the words, Dad called up the stairs to let me know that breakfast was ready. Fox gave me as if he was bragging that he had been right.

I rolled my eyes at him, getting out of bed and heading downstairs with Fox following behind me.

"Good mor—" Dad stopped short, choking slightly as his eyes focused on Fox and me. "Oh, hi Fox. Didn't know you stayed over."

"Dan," Mindy said in a warning tone, swatting Dad's shoulder.

Fox looked embarrassed, his cheeks reddening as Josh and Ian began laughing from where they sat at the kitchen table.

"You don't usually sleep without a shirt on Elijah," Dad added. "Why are you—"

"Dad!" I exclaimed, my voice going higher than I anticipated.

"On that note, my brother's here to pick me up," Fox said, awkwardly looking down at his phone.

"I'll walk you out," I muttered, turning and leading Fox out of the house.

The two of us scurried as quickly as we could out the front door and down the driveway to where Wren's car was parked in the street.

When we reached the car, Wren stuck his hand out the window to wave. Open skin on his knuckles caught my eye and I quickly looked to Fox to see his eyes fixed on them as well.

"Wren, what the fuck?" Fox asked, gesturing toward his brother's hand.

Wren rolled his eyes, resting his arm out the window.

"It's nothing, get in," he said in a bored tone.

Fox's eyes turned dark, narrowing at his brother as he tightly pressed his lips together in a thin line.

"What did you do?" Fox slowly asked, his tone low and matching his expression.

Wren gave him a blank stare, keeping his mouth closed as he raised his eyebrows.

"Come on, Fox," he said. "Get in the car. We have to go."

"I'm not getting in until you tell me what you did," Fox retorted, placing his hands on his hips.

"You won't get in if I tell you," Wren said with a sigh.

Fox didn't answer. Instead, the brothers stared each other down, each willing the other to give in. It was then that I noticed how similar the two of them looked. Their matching expectant expressions highlighted their likeness, and their matching stubbornness reminded me of why the two of them were always butting heads.

Wren let out a longer sigh, looking up briefly as he shook his head.

"Fine," he caved, dragging his eyes back down to Fox. "I may have paid a visit to one of the guys that attacked you."

My eyes widened at his confession, but Fox didn't seem to be all that surprised.

"How did you even find him?"

"It wasn't hard to find the driveway with the car you described," Wren said with a scoff. "I was just slashing his tires and then he came out throwing punches."

Other than his knuckles, Wren seemed to be unscathed. He had either gotten away or the other guy didn't put up much of a fight.

Fox was silent, his jaw tightly set. He turned toward me and took a deep breath before leaning in to give me a chaste kiss on the lips.

"I'll come back later," he said in a low tone against my lips.

I hummed in agreement, nodding my head slightly. "Okay."

Without another word, Fox climbed into the passenger's seat of Wren's car and the two were off.

When I made my way back into the kitchen, Ava had found her way downstairs and was now sitting at the kitchen table. She looked up at me with a disgusted expression, holding a whole waffle in front of her face with a fork.

"Put a fricken shirt on," she said before taking a large bite.

I sat down beside her, nudging her arm with my elbow. Ian let out a short laugh as he continued eating his breakfast.

"Sorry if I embarrassed you," Dad said with a sheepish smile. "Still not used to the two of you being together."

"Dad embarrassed you and I missed it?" Ava whined, shaking her head.

"It's okay, you only traumatize my boyfriend every time you speak," I sarcastically replied.

Dad laughed, grinning down at his plate as he cut up his waffle.

"That's what Dads are for," he said. "He could've stayed for breakfast. How is he, by the way? Those bruised looked bad."

I cringed thinking about Fox's injuries. I didn't have the heart to tell Dad the reason why Fox had been attacked.

" *He* says he's fine," I said with a sigh, resting my elbow on the table and my head in my hand.

We finished up breakfast with casual conversation before Dad and Mindy left the room to get ready for the day.

"Trevor isn't attached at your hip today?" Ian asked in a snarky tone, piquing my interest.

I had been curious about what was going on with Josh and Trevor, but decided to stay out of his business like he had been doing for my relationship with Fox.

Josh rolled his eyes at him, taking a sip of his coffee.

"What's going on with you two?" I couldn't stop myself from asking. "Are you guys, like, *together* ?"

Josh placed his coffee cup down on the table, turning his attention to me after briefly looking at Ava, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

"We're just friends," Josh admitted, his voice serious and non-wavering. "We talked, *a lot*, and we just kinda get each other."

He paused for a moment, letting out a quiet laugh as he shook his head and looked down at his lap.

"I don't know," he continued. "It probably sounds stupid."

"It's not stupid," I instantly denied.

Josh glanced back at me, a small smile blossoming on his face to which I returned.

Not long after that, I was sitting in the backseat of Dad's car on our way to the lawyer's office to file the restraining order. Dad and Mindy spoke quietly in the front seat while I zoned out on the surroundings we passed.

The process was a lot shorter than I thought it was going to be. I just had to talk with the lawyer about the things Dave had done and express that I felt unsafe around him. There had to be a temporary restraining order for ten days before a longer one could be approved. Under the order, Dave was not allowed to come within two hundred feet of me, and he could not contact me.

Dad and Mindy dropped me off at home afterward because they had a meeting with another lawyer that I didn't need to be present for.

As I stepped into the house, Josh, Ava, and Ian were all about to head out the door.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked in confusion.

"Dropping Ian off at work, Ava at Fawn's," Josh said. "You don't need the car, do you?"

"No, I'll be fine," I replied before saying goodbye to Ava and Ian.

"How did it go with the lawyer?" Josh asked once Ian and Ava were outside.

"It went okay I think," I admitted with a shrug.

Josh nodded. "Good. I'll see you later."

With that, I was left alone.

Without any distractions, I found it hard to keep my mind off of my guilt. Whenever it could, it would creep back and pull me into those dark thoughts.

However, it didn't take long for a distraction to come.

A car I would recognize anywhere pulled up to the house, causing my throat to dry and my body to still.

Dave and Mom both got out of the car, Landon staying in the backseat, and started making their way to the house. I didn't know what possessed me to do it, but I rushed outside to stop them.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, my voice quick and breathless.

"We're picking you up," Mom said as if she didn't know the implications of her words.

I stayed silent, planting my feet where I stood.

"Come on, Elijah," Dave demanded with dark eyes. "We don't have time for this. Let's go."

"I'm not going with you," I denied, shaking my head.

I glanced over at Landon, who had his eyes focused on me. I couldn't tell if he was silently pleading for help or willing me to run away. Either way, I couldn't let them leave here with him. An unfamiliar feeling rose in my chest at the thought of watching them drive away with Landon in the back seat.

Without allowing Dave to respond, my feet took me over to the car, whether I wanted to walk over there or not. I tore open the passenger's side back door and leaned in. Landon sat behind the driver's seat, shaking his head at me with wide eyes.

"Landon, get out of the car," I urged in a forceful tone.

"Elijah, stop," he hissed, his voice low and his eyes darting past me.

Before I could stand up straight, Dave had his hands on me, trying to shove me into the car. Landon's eyes widened, but he didn't dare move.

"Get in the car," Dave snapped as I pushed against him.

"Dave!" Mom called out, and his hands automatically left me. He still stood behind me so that I could not leave the car.

I tried to silently communicate with Landon, willing him to get out of the car, but he stayed put.

"Elijah!" a familiar voice snapped.

I turned to see Fox standing behind the car, his eyes wide and filling with angry tears.

"Were you just going to leave?" he questioned with a shaky voice, yet it cut through me like a knife. "Without saying goodbye?"

"No!" I replied, using all my strength to push Dave backward and move away from the car. "I wasn't, Fox."

His jaw was tensely set as he moved his glare to Dave. Fox started moving toward him, his hand in a fist, before I grabbed him by the shoulders to stop him.

"Stop, you're hurt," I pleaded, looking at him with wide eyes.

"I'm fine," he said, looking past me at Dave.

"I thought I made it clear that you are to not get in the way," Dave said, setting a glare on Fox.

"Dave, what are you talking about?" Mom asked, looking between Fox and her husband. He ignored her as he reached out for me.

Dave grabbed me around the waist and pulled me away from Fox. I struggled in his grip, kicking at his legs and trying to pull his arms off me. A

sudden collision freed me as I shared a surprised look with Fox. I quickly scurried back to my boyfriend before turning to see what had happened.

Landon had Dave on the ground, restraining him as he struggled. Mom gasped as Landon held her husband to the ground.

"Landon, sweetie, let him up okay?" she said in a panicked tone before looking back at me. "Elijah, please get in the car. We can talk about this on the way."

She held her hand out to me, hoping I would take it. I stared down at it for a moment before looking in her eyes. The love I always craved from my mother wasn't there. All that was in her eyes was hope that I would comply, not love for me. And that was what made me snap.

"No, Mom!" I exclaimed.

My booming voice caused her to jump back, tears springing in her eyes.

"I'm done with you!" I yelled, Mom wincing at my tone. "I'm done with you trying to make me feel guilty. Like I should *want* to go with you and be some happy fucking family."

Fox placed a comforting hand on my back.

"Ever since you kicked me out, I *craved* attention from you," I continued, tears welling up in my own eyes. "I wanted you to love me for me."

"Honey, I do—"

"No, you don't!" I cut her off, my voice cracking slightly. "You're trying to take me away to change me, to *fix* me, but I can't be fixed, Mom! There's nothing to fix! I am the way I am!"

The tears were spilling over her eyes now and I could feel my face heat up in anger.

"And for months now I've been wanting to have it both ways," I continued. "I wanted to have you love me while still being who I am, but you make it

impossible. You want me to be your pawn that you can manipulate into the perfect son you want."

Landon was still holding Dave down, his struggles dying down.

"But I can't be that for you," I cried, a hot tear spilling down my cheek. "And I don't want to be. I'm happy now, Mom, really happy."

I had never expressed it out loud, but after all the long months of feeling out of place, I was truly happy with where I was.

"This house," I started, gesturing toward the house, "is my home. Dad, Mindy, Josh, and Ava are my *family* . I've never known what a real family felt like and now that I finally do you want to tear me away from them?"

Mom let out a quiet sob, but didn't say anything. Fox's hand started moving on my back, rubbing it slowly.

"I have good friends who like me for me," I continued. "And friends that are *like* me that I can relate to."

I took a deep breath, another tear swimming down my cheek.

"I have a boyfriend that I fell in love with," I said, my breath hitching in my throat as Mom's eyes widened in surprise.

Fox's hand went still on my back and I didn't have it in me to face him.

"I love him, Mom," I said with a sad smile, letting out a tearful laugh. "And you think the love I have for him isn't real because you think I can't *actually* be in love with another guy, but I am."

"Elijah, please," Mom cried, shaking her head.

"I don't want anything to do with you," I told her, wiping my tears from my face. "As long as you're with him, I don't want to see you or talk to you or even hear from you."

"That's enough, Elijah," Dave spat, still being held down by Landon.

I didn't even look at him. As Mom continued crying, I didn't even notice Dad and Mindy had pulled into the driveway until Dad came rushing over and stood in front of me.

"What is going on?" he snapped, looking at my mother with an angry expression.

He didn't wait for an answer before he grabbed Dave from Landon and shoved him against the car. Mindy came beside me, wrapping an arm around me as she watched the events unfold.

"I know you were notified of Elijah's restraining order," Dad said in a low tone as he held Dave against the car. "So you can either leave here and never come back or I can have you arrested and you can spend the night in jail."

Dave didn't say anything.

"And then we can have them look into everything you've done to Elijah and Fox," Dad seethed. "I'm done fucking around. If you don't get out of here I *will* make sure you regret it."

Dave just scoffed as we all watched in anticipation.

"I've already spoken to lawyers, I know you two can't do anything," Dad continued in a low tone. "So if you want to make this a battle, we'll make it a battle and you'll lose."

Dad and Dave shared hard glares before Dave let out a huff and nodded.

"Let's go," he muttered, looking to Mom who was still crying. She nodded, gesturing toward Landon for him to follow.

"Leave Landon here," I spoke up in a shaky voice.

Mindy walked over to Landon and pulled him toward us, causing Dave's face to sour even more. He didn't say anything as my dad stood in his way, practically forcing him to get in the car.

Watching as they drove away was bittersweet. My mother would choose Dave over me, and she always would. That was something I had to accept. Even though I felt a tug on my heart at the thought of her leaving, it finally felt like I was at peace without worry of her playing with my emotions.

"Are you boys okay?" Mindy asked the three of us with a concerned expression.

Landon zoned out on the ground, staring at his feet.

"Why don't you come inside and sit down, Landon?" Mindy suggested, gently grabbing his arm and leading him into the house.

"Are you guys okay?" Dad asked Fox and I, pulling me into a hug and kissing my head.

Fox nodded with a look of contemplation while I hugged my Dad back.

"I'm never going to let them hurt you again," Dad said. "I love you."

"I love you too," I said into his shoulder before he pulled away and left Fox and me outside.

We stared at each other for a few moments in silence before Fox spoke up.

"Did you mean what you said?" he asked quietly, giving me an intense stare.

"What?"

"That you're in love with me?"

My face reddened at his words. When I said that, I had been emotionally invested in the moment. I was ranting and I couldn't stop myself. That didn't mean that it wasn't genuine though.

"Uh..." I trailed, scratching the back of my neck in discomfort. "Yeah, I meant it."

The words barely left my mouth before Fox's lips were on mine. He caressed my cheeks in his hands, kissing me tenderly. My hands found their way to his hips as I responded to the kiss. Fox pulled away, keeping his face only inches from mine.

"I love you," he said in a breathless tone.

A smile broke out on my face before I leaned in to kiss him again.

"I love you," I said against his lips.

The last few months of my life had been nothing short of emotional. I went from feeling like an empty shell to finally feeling like I had a place, feeling like I belonged. With Fox's arms wrapped around me, his lips on mine, I knew the journey was worth it. Despite all the lows I went through, where I was now made everything worth it. With Dave and Mom out of the picture, my life could be what I always hoped it would.

And now I could finally live like I was free, on steady ground with no fear of falling through the cracks.

**

THE END

Well, not really. There is still an Epilogue to come so stay on the lookout for that. The Epilogue will *hopefully* answer any remaining questions and tie up any loose ends that this chapter didn't address.

Thank you for your patience while I got this chapter ready for you!

This chapter is a lot longer than any of my others so there is a lot to unpack. Let me know what you thought about everything! About Elijah's thoughts at the beginning? His time with Ian? Having to go to Micah's because of Landon? Fox showing up? And what about the ending with Dave and Susan and their last efforts to get Elijah to go with them. What did you think about everything Elijah said? And his

development throughout the story about him being unhappy and not belonging to finally having happiness? And the I love you's!

Thank you to everyone who read even a word of this book! I love these characters so much and I love being able to share them with you. (Longer thank you to come in the Epilogue).

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For those of you who don't know, Lebanon experienced a large explosion in Beirut and could really use some help. Please go to the links above to learn more and donate if you can!

Epilogue

I had always felt like my life had never truly been mine. I used to play a part, living in the background and unable to dig myself out of depths I had found myself falling into. That all began to change when I moved in with my father.

The months had been long as I tried to find my place, but in the end I did.

Now, the day after my high school graduation, I had to move onto a new chapter. One that would hopefully improve on the last.

Josh was driving the two of us home from the place Mindy had cater our graduation party. She had sent us to get the food because, for some reason, she still had things she was cooking for the party while Dad set up tables and chairs outside.

"We're going to have left overs for weeks," Josh said when we got home and started bringing the food to the back yard.

"Mindy will pawn most of it off on people I'm sure," I replied as he held the gate open for me.

Dad had already set up the food tables so we could set the trays down and grab the rest from the car. Mindy watched us from the kitchen window, sending a wave our way.

After putting the food down, Dad enlisted our help in setting up chairs around the yard, and not long after, Fox came strolling into the backyard. He had a backwards baseball cap placed on his head, his hair curling out of the bottom.

"Need some help?" Fox asked with a grin as he made his way over, snaking his arm around my waist and pulling me in for a brief kiss.

"Enough of that," Josh complained, shoving Fox as he walked by.

Fox sent an amused glance Josh's way before placing another kiss on my lips, earning a look of disgust from my brother.

"I can give you a kiss too, Josh, if you're jealous," Fox teased, grabbing the chairs from my hand and setting them up near the others.

"No," I immediately denied, shaking my head.

"I wouldn't want one from you," Josh retorted, rolling his eyes. "You look ridiculous, you need a haircut."

"Your brother thinks my hair looks sexy," Fox replied just as Dad came back outside.

I didn't say anything because it was true; I *did* think his hair looked sexy.

"I think your hair looks nice," Dad added with a grin.

"Thanks Dan," Fox said, looking over at Josh with a boastful expression. Josh just rolled his eyes and didn't say anything.

We continued setting up everything outside for a while, Mindy and Ava bringing out more food once it was done cooking. Mindy had been worried all week that we wouldn't have enough food for her ginormous family and all of mine and Josh's friends. I was convinced she had gone overboard.

"Fox, your family is coming, right?" Mindy asked after all of us were back inside, waiting for guests to arrive.

"Yeah, they'll all be here," he answered with a nod, taking a sip of lemonade.

"Perfect. I need to talk to Vanessa about our yoga class," Mindy replied.

Mindy and Vanessa had gotten close over the course of mine and Fox's relationship. The two women would often spend time together as what started as doing things with Fawn and Ava, then transformed into a friendship between the two of them.

We had a little bit until guests were due to arrive, so Fox and I sneaked up to my room. Well, there wasn't much sneaking involved because we had been caught by Dad who was sure to remind us to keep the door open, though he knew we wouldn't.

Once Fox and I were alone in my room, I tightly shut the door before moving to lie on my bed. Fox took the opportunity to lie on top of me, hugging my waist and resting his head on my chest while I took his hat off and let my fingers play with his hair.

"Comfy?" I asked with a chuckle as my finger twirled a curl in his hair.

"Mhm," he hummed against my chest.

"I'm gonna miss this," I said with a sigh, causing Fox to pick his head up and look at me with a strange expression.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked me, his eyes narrowing. "Our schools are literally five minutes away from each other. I think we'll manage."

Fox had gotten into Northeastern and their hockey team while I had gotten into Boston University. The schools were right near each other in the city, but I was still worried we wouldn't be able to see each other much.

"We're gonna have busy schedules," I reminded him. "It's gonna be hard to see each other."

"I'm not worried about that right now. We have the whole summer together," Fox said, placing his head back on my chest and rubbing his hand up and down my abdomen. "What *I'm* worried about is meeting your grandparents today."

I scoffed, tugging on his hair. "Why are you worried about that?"

"Because there is a possibility that they'll hate me," he said, his tone suggesting I should have already known this.

I rolled my eyes and lightly smacked him on the head.

"It's impossible to hate you," I told him.

"Shut up," he grumbled, his face against my chest.

It was only a few seconds later when Dad called up the stairs for the two of us to come down, letting us know that my grandparents had arrived. At the sound of my Dad's words, Fox shot up off my chest and stood next to the bed. I looked up at him, holding my hand out for him to pull me off the bed.

"Are you ready to meet them?" I asked with a sarcastic grin as Fox clasped my hand in his and pulled me to stand next to him.

Fox had a pout on his face as he picked up his hat from the bed and situated it back onto his head, taming the hair I had messed up with my fingers moments before.

"No," he grumbled.

"Why is it that you're always nervous to meet my family, yet I'm not nervous meeting yours?" I asked him, opening the bedroom door and leading him out into the hall toward the stairs.

"Because you're more naturally likable than me," Fox replied in a serious tone.

"That's not it."

I led Fox down the stairs where I heard conversation happening in the kitchen. As soon as we entered, my grandmother was in front of me, throwing her arms around me in a tight hug.

"Oh, Elijah, sweetheart, I'm so sorry we missed your graduation," Gram cried in an exaggerated tone. "Our flight kept getting delayed!"

"It's okay, Gram," I replied, returning her hug before she pulled away and went over to Fox.

"And you must be Fox," she said, wrapping her arms around him. "It's so good to finally meet you!"

I chuckled as he slowly returned the hug, his eyes darting to me. "It's good to meet you too," he said.

"Enough of that," Grandpa interjected. "Let the boys breathe."

Gram let go of Fox to place her hands on her hips as she glared over at her husband. Grandpa ignored her glare in order to introduce himself to Fox, shaking his hand.

"Anyway, how was graduation?" Gram asked, looking around at each of us. "We didn't miss too much, did we?"

"It was fine," Josh answered her with a shrug. "You didn't miss much at all."

Our graduation was just like any other ceremony going on, nothing special about it. There wasn't even someone who tried to get laughs by making a fool out of themselves. It was just speeches and diplomas. Boring.

"It was *so* boring," Ava added. "When I graduate, I'm not going."

"You weren't even paying attention," Mindy pointed out. "There was no way you could've been bored."

"You only graduate high school once, Ava," Gram told her. "You might change you mind when the time comes."

"Nah, she's right," I said. "It was pretty boring."

Fox chuckled at that, standing close to me.

Since we were all sitting in alphabetical order at graduation, I wasn't near any of my friends. Alex was a row behind me, trying to get my attention the whole time, but Fox and Ian were closer to the back. All I could do was sit there with no one to whisper to when I got bored.

"You'll look back on it with fond memories when you're older," Gram assured me, placing her hand on my shoulder.

It wasn't long after that other family members started to arrive. Mindy's ginormous family quickly filled up our backyard, her sister's many kids running around as the adults mingled. Fox, Josh, and I sat on chairs near the back porch, greeting family as they walked by.

"Tracey looks like she's ready to pop," Josh commented as Mindy's pregnant sister walked by.

"She's due within the next couple weeks," I replied. "Do they know what they're having?"

Josh shook his head. "They wanted it to be a surprise."

"I guess once you're on your eighth kid it doesn't matter as much," Fox commented, leaning forward in his seat and lightly brushing his fingers over my thigh.

I hummed in agreement, leaning closer to him as Josh shook his head at us.

"The guys need to get here so I'm not third wheeling anymore," Josh uttered with a sigh.

I glared at him while Fox glanced over with a smug expression, his lips quirking up in a smirk.

"Don't lie," Fox started, his sarcastic grin widening. "You enjoy third wheeling."

"He secretly does," I added to which Josh just shook his head again.

A moment later, three of Mindy's young nieces came over to us with wide eyes, the oldest not being older than ten. Their wide eyed gazes shifted to Fox, him raising his eyebrows at the girls.

"Who's he?" one of the girls, Talia, asked.

"That's Elijah's boyfriend Fox," Josh answered her.

"He's cute," another girl, Paula, added, causing Fox to let out a loud chuckle.

"Yes, I know," I replied with a sigh, knocking my leg into his to get him to stop laughing.

"I guess you're just a lucky guy, sweetheart," Fox chuckled, tossing his shoulder over mine which caused a chorus of squeals from the girls.

I rolled my eyes, leaning into his side. "You're the lucky one."

Fox nodded, letting out a content sigh.

The girls squealed again when some of Mindy's nephews started squirting water guns at them. The three of them ran away, being chased by their cousins.

"You can't go anywhere without being called hot," I told Fox, turning to face him with raised eyebrows.

Fox scoffed. "I could say the same about you but you're too modest to admit it."

"Are you admitting that you're not modest?"

"You know I'm not," he said.

"Can you two stop flirting for like two seconds?" Josh questioned with an irritated expression, looking down at his phone.

Fox reached over and smacked Josh's phone out of his hand, resulting in a nasty scowl from my brother.

"I can flirt a lot worse than that," Fox warned.

Josh scoffed, picking his phone up from the ground. "I know you can."

Fox wasn't able to respond when Alex's voice sounded through the air.

"The party has arrived!" Alex exclaimed as he walked through the backyard gate, lifting two cases of alcohol in his hands over his head.

"Are you seriously not even going to hide the fact that your brought alcohol?" I asked him, judging him with my eyes as he, Ryan, and Ian made their way over to us.

"Your folks won't mind right?" he asked, placing the cases down in front of us as he pulled up a chair.

Before I could say anything, Mindy walked by.

"If you drink a drop of alcohol, you're staying here tonight," she said in a stern tone as she passed us.

"See? All set!" Alex said with a wide grin as Ryan and Ian pulled over their own chairs.

"Guess I'm not drinking so I don't have to have a sleepover with him," Ian commented with a scoff.

"Rude," Alex replied with a pout, crossing his arms over his chest. "I wish Liam was here, he wouldn't treat me like this."

"He's in Aruba, he's not thinking about you at all," Ryan told him with a chuckle.

Jude showed up a few minutes later, immediately helping himself to Alex's alcohol.

When Fox's family arrived, I stood up to greet them.

"Hey guys, thanks for coming," I said with a smile as Vanessa leaned in for a hug.

"Wouldn't miss it," she said, squeezing me in her arms.

Fawn immediately headed off to where she saw Ava, after greeting me. Then Colt mingled with the younger kids and joined in on their game.

"Where do we put the gifts?" Leo asked me, holding out cards with my name and Josh's.

"Oh, you didn't have to get us anything," I said, slightly shaking my head. Leo gave me a look as if I was crazy.

"I should be giving you gifts just for putting up with Fox," he responded, handing me the cards.

I liked to think that we put up with each other; I knew I could be a lot to handle.

After taking the cards from Leo, he and Vanessa went over to my parents while I dropped the cards off with the rest. Raven, Robin, and Wren joined the group where Fox sat. By the time I had gotten over there, there were no seats left.

"You can sit on my lap," Fox suggested with a cheeky grin, holding his arms out for me.

"Or, I can go find another chair," I retorted, my eyebrows lifting on my face.

"Ooo. Rejected," Robin laughed, causing the others to laugh along with him.

Fox kicked his brother's chair, nearly causing it to tip over. Raven steadied Robin, shaking her head at Fox.

Before Fox could try pushing him over again, I took him up on his offer and situated myself in his lap. I could tell he had a smug look on his face by the content sigh that escaped his lips as he slung his arm around my waist.

"Get a room," Ian commented as he glared at the two of us.

Fox scoffed. "You guys are all just jealous because you're all single."

"Hey!" Alex exclaimed. "I am not single!"

"You and Beth are *barely* dating," Jude told him before taking a sip out of his can.

"You obviously didn't see us make out at graduation," Alex pointed out. "Elijah saw, right?" He turned to me.

I nodded with a grimace on my face.

Unfortunately, I did turn a corner and get a face full of Alex using way too much tongue in public with Beth.

"That doesn't mean you're *dating* ," Jude argued. "You make out and fuck __"

Alex abruptly cut him off, telling Jude how "untrue" his words were. My attention was drawn to Fox's fingers playing with the hem of my t-shirt. Wren sat beside us, eyeing Fox's actions.

The two of them had gotten considerably closer over the last two months. They still weren't incredibly close, but they had been consistently getting along for a while, only getting in arguments periodically.

However, by the way Wren watched him and how Fox wouldn't look his way, I could tell the two must have been at odds today.

"Want to go with me to get more chairs?" I quietly asked Fox, turning slightly on his lap so that I could get a better look at his face.

"What? You don't want to sit with me?" he asked, feigning offense.

I just rolled my eyes at him.

Fox tapped my hips, signaling for me to stand. The two of us stood and started making our way away from the group and toward the garage.

"Be right back," I said, more to Josh than anyone else.

"Where are you going?" Josh asked.

"Getting more chairs."

"Is that *all* you're doing?" he questioned in a suggestive tone.

I scoffed, turning to send him a disgusted look. "Don't be gross."

With that, Fox and I left the group and made our way to the garage where the rest of the chairs were.

"How many fucking chairs do you guys own?" Fox asked as we entered the garage where the copious amount of folding chairs were leaning against the wall.

"Mindy rented these," I told him, moving to grab a few. "She has a huge family if you couldn't tell."

"Yeah, I noticed," he said, following my actions.

We stood in silence for a few moments before I set my chairs down, earning a confused look from my boyfriend.

"Is everything okay with you and Wren?" I asked him. I couldn't help but be nosy when it was so painfully obvious that something had gone on.

Fox sighed and leaned his chairs back against the wall. "We just got into it this morning."

I nodded, waiting to see if he wanted to continue.

"It was kind of my fault," he admitted after a few moments.

"What did you do?"

"I sorta just *mentioned* how he hasn't come out to our parents yet," Fox started. "He keeps saying he's going to and then he puts it off."

I nodded in understanding.

"I'm not—" Fox continued, letting out a slightly frustrated sigh. "I'm not trying to pressure him or anything but he needs a little bit of a push. I know he wants to do it but he won't on his own."

"Were you nice about it or were you mean about it?" I asked him, knowing all too well the kind of attitude Fox often copped.

He gave me a sheepish smile and took his hat off for a moment to roughly run his hand through his hair before putting it back on. Without any words, that was all the answer I needed.

"Wren and I don't really do *nice* ," Fox said, turning to pick up the chairs again. "We can't do that sappy shit. We just don't have that kind of relationship."

"Yeah, I know," I agreed, grabbing my chairs and turning to lead him out of the garage.

"So I *may* have been a little rude and he freaked out at me," Fox continued. "And now he's obviously feeling guilty for freaking out at me but won't admit it."

I sighed, opening the gate to the backyard.

"Don't sigh like you're mad at me," Fox said in an almost whiny tone.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because you think I should be a better person?"

I rolled my eyes, grinning over at him and bumping my shoulder into his.

"I think you should maybe talk to your brother," I told him as we continued walking through the backyard.

As we walked through the yard, I noticed the GSA group standing near the rest of our friends. Austin had already helped himself to one of Alex's drinks, leaning against his chair as he listened to Alex say something.

"Oh good!" Austin exclaimed when he saw us. "You brought chairs!"

I nodded, handing him one that he then set up next to Alex, or more importantly, next to the drinks.

"There's my favorite couple," Claudia greeted, taking a chair from Fox and me for her and Holly.

"Rude," Nadia commented as we set down the rest of the chairs.

"You and Lexa won't go on double dates with us," Claudia defended, setting her chair up close to her girlfriend. "They will."

"More like we're forced to," Fox added, sitting back down next to Wren.

I shook my head at him before going over to where Trevor and Johnny stood next to where Josh sat.

"Hey!" Trevor greeted with a wide grin, tossing an arm around me in a brief hug.

"Hey, Trev," I said, returning the hug. "Need a seat?"

He nodded, grabbing one for himself while I greeted Johnny. Trevor situated himself next to Josh as the two of them spoke.

I wasn't even going to begin to try and understand their friendship. The two had become best friends in a few short months. They always spent time together and Trevor had even convinced Josh to attend a few GSA meetings with him. As much as I thought Josh was going to end up dating him, it never happened.

By the time everyone had gotten a seat, I was left without one again. When I turned to look at Fox, he was already staring at me with a smug expression and patting his lap for me to sit.

Before I could even make my way over to him, Dad was called out my name and waving me over to where he stood. As soon as I turned to face

him, I noticed the Hanson's were standing in front of him, along with Landon who awkwardly stood with his hands in his pockets beside Micah.

Micah and I had somewhat kept in touch over the last few months, though we hadn't seen each other much at all. Landon had ended up moving in with the Hanson's. I didn't know much about Landon's situation with his parents, but considering he was here with Micah's family, I assumed it wasn't good.

"Hey guys," I greeted when I walked over, standing next to my father.

"Congrats on graduating, Elijah," Mr. Hanson said with a smile. "We just wanted to drop by and extend an invitation to Micah and Landon's graduation party next weekend."

I exchanged a glance with Micah, who gave me a small smile, before looking over at Landon. He seemed like he felt out of place, though I didn't blame him.

"Yeah, of course," I replied with a nod. "I'll be there."

"Fox can come too," Micah added with a smirk, glancing over to where my boyfriend was watching us like a hawk.

I tried to tell him to stop with the look in my eyes, but he continued staring.

As Dad and Mr. Hanson continued talking, I thought about what I had just agreed to. If I went to Micah's party, I would have to face my old team and although Landon didn't look as if he was going to start throwing punches at me, I couldn't be so sure about the rest.

"The team's not going," Micah said, tearing me away from my thoughts. "Well, most of them aren't. If that's what you were thinking about."

"They're not?"

Micah shook his head. "It was really weird with all of us after the tournament. We couldn't get it together and that's why we sucked so bad and missed the playoffs this year."

"So you guys don't even talk?" I wondered.

"We're only still friends with a few of them," Micah answered, glancing over at Landon briefly.

Landon stood with a rigid posture, his hands in his pockets as he looked down at the ground. It was almost as if he could feel my stare just before he glanced up and locked eyes with me. Dad and Mr. Hanson had drifted away from us slightly, lost in their own conversation and leaving the three of us alone.

"I, uh," Landon started, looking down at the ground and clearing his throat before looking back at me. "I wanted to apologize to you."

His voice was softer than I had ever heard it. Landon was always one to make his presence known. He was a force, always seeming so sure of himself, though I knew that to be untrue.

"For the way I treated you," he continued. "I uh, I was in a dark place, but I'm better now."

I slowly nodded, taking in a deep breath. "That's good to hear. Thanks for apologizing."

Landon nodded. "I'm still, you know, figuring myself out."

I knew what he meant even if he didn't say it. Landon was still coming to terms with his sexuality. He had spent so much of his life being instilled with hatred for who he was. He had suppressed his true self due to all the lies he was told about what he was. It had taken time for me to come to terms with my own sexuality and self hatred, and it would take time for him too.

"Yeah, I get that," I agreed with a light smile.

Micah smiled at the two of us before redirecting the conversation.

"So I heard you committed to BU?" he said with excitement.

"Yeah," I replied, guilt creeping on me as I realized I didn't know anything of Micah's school plans. "Where did you guys commit?"

"I'm going to BC, Landon's going to Providence," Micah replied, looking over my shoulder as he spoke.

I was surprised to hear Landon was going to Providence College. He was a legacy for Notre Dame, both of his parents being alumni, so he was always set on going there.

Just as I turned to see what Micah was looking at, Fox showed up beside me and put his arm around my shoulders.

"Everything okay?" Fox asked, though it was like he was asking the group as he stared Landon down.

"Everything's fine," I assured him.

I gave him a stern look that hopefully told him not to make a scene. He was understandably distrusting of Landon, so I knew he had probably had a hard time restraining himself from walking over here for as long as he did.

"I should probably apologize to you too," Landon spoke up, his voice even.

Fox gave him a questioning look as he tightened his arm around me.

"For fighting with you and making things hard on you and Elijah," Landon clarified.

Fox nodded, but didn't say anything else.

Eventually Mr. Hanson, Micah, and Landon left, saying they had other graduation parties they had to stop by at.

"So is he, like, *out* now?" Fox asked quietly as we walked back toward our friends.

"No," I denied, shaking my head. "He's still figuring it out I guess."

Once we got back to the group, Alex insisted on all of us playing some of the yard games we had out. He eventually dragged Austin into being his partner for cornhole against Fox and Ian while I stood off to the side with Wren to watch. Josh, Trevor, Claudia, and Holly played on the other cornhole set and our group was split watching the two games.

"So..." I trailed, gaining Wren's attention as he loosely crossed his arms over his chest. "Are you not talking to Fox?"

Wren rolled his eyes. "I'm not an idiot, Elijah. I know if you're asking me that, then you've already talked to him about it."

"I told him to talk to you," I said, briefly looking at Fox ross the bean bag before turning back to Wren.

"I don't need him to talk to me," Wren replied. "We're fine."

"Okay..."

We were quiet for a few moments before Wren looked around, seemingly making sure we weren't too close to others, before speaking to me in a hushed tone.

"Did he say what it was about?"

I nodded which caused Wren to send a brief glare to his brother, who was busy high-fiving Ian.

"Remember when you came out to me and Fox?" I whispered, leaning closer to him so no one would hear.

He hummed in agreement.

"How did you feel when you did that?"

I wasn't asking to be rude. I really wanted to know what he was *feeling* that gave him to courage to come out.

"Like I had nothing to lose," Wren admitted after a pause. "And I knew Fox wouldn't say anything to anyone. He's not like that."

"What about me?"

"No offense, but I didn't really care what you thought," Wren told me.

I let out a snort, turning back to face the game in front of us.

"You know, your parents won't judge you," I told him while still staring straight ahead.

He was silent for a moment, a look of contemplation on his face. It always took a lot for Wren to admit any of his short-comings or insecurities, and even when he did admit them, it was vague.

Wren didn't have the chance to say anything else when Fox threw the last bean bag, getting it in the hole on the board and winning the game for he and Ian. Alex let out a disgruntled sound of disappointment while Fox and Ian harbored boastful expressions.

"Did you see me win?" Fox asked as he walked over to me, immediately placing his hands on my hips to pull me closer.

"Oh yeah, it was *so* impressive," I sarcastically replied, tossing one arm around his shoulders.

"Do I get a kiss for my victory?"

Before I could reply, Wren let out a scoff which gained his brother's attention.

"You're nauseating," Wren told him.

"It's called *charm* ," Fox told his brother. "You wouldn't know anything about that."

"Apparently neither do you, *Foxy* ," Wren retorted.

Fox sent a scowl his way as Ian came up to the three of us, obviously having heard what Wren had said. Ian continued chuckling when he stood in front of us, Fox's scowl shifting to him.

"I still can't get over that fucking name," Ian laughed, shaking his head.

"He's so whipped over it too," Wren added, glancing over at Ian. "All Elijah has to do is say it and he'll do anything he wants."

"Oh, *I know* ," Ian replied.

"Shut up, both of you," Fox snapped, causing the two to share smug smirks.

I discretely grinned with Ian and Wren, knowing their words were true.

Later on, once it was dark, the family members had left the party, leaving just our friends sitting around a fire and drinking the alcohol Alex had brought. Alex was already pretty drunk, scaring me every time he got up from his seat and got too close to the fire. Luckily, Ryan was there to pull him back from a few close calls.

"You know," Alex slurred, pointing toward Fox and me. "I asked you guys before how you got together and you never told me."

Fox had decided to sit in my lap when we gathered around for a fire. There were more than enough chairs for everyone to have their own, but he tended to get especially cuddly at night and I definitely didn't mind holding him close.

"Oh, I'm very interested in this," Claudia commented with a wide grin before finishing off her can.

Small conversations between everyone in the group stopped as they all looked to Fox and me, willing us to tell the story. The only one who didn't look curious was Ian. His face was smug as he looked at the two of us.

"Ian, do you fucking know?" Josh asked as he noticed the look on his face. "There is no way you know."

"I didn't say anything," Ian shot back with a shrug.

Josh narrowed his eyes at him. "I can tell."

Fox let out an exaggerated sigh. "It's really not that interesting of a story."

Ian snorted, shaking his head at Fox's words.

"You do know!" Alex accused, stumbling as he stood up to point at Ian. Ryan and Jude both reached out to steady him, putting him back in his seat.

"We met last summer," I started, causing everyone's attention to be back at us. "At some club."

"Ooo, this sounds like it's going to get hot," Austin said, leaning forward in his seat and giving me his undivided attention.

"So you knew each other before school?" Josh asked with a confused look on his face.

"Kinda?" I said in a sheepish tone, feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment.

"We *may have* had sex in the back of Elijah's Honda," Fox added, causing the group to let out noises of surprise, shock taking over their faces.

Alex shot up out of his seat again, staring at us with his eyes wide. Josh had a similar expression on his face while Trevor's was a little more subdued as he sat beside him.

"Wow!" Nadia exclaimed with a laugh, the first to say anything. "Now, *that* was unexpected."

Claudia nodded in agreement, giggling with Holly.

"So you two were dating since the summer?" Trevor asked, his voice sounding curious with some discomfort.

My eyes widened. "No, no. We weren't dating until we got home from the tournament in December."

That just made Trevor look more confused.

"It was a one night stand," Fox clarified. "Then I tried avoiding him when he first got here, but I kissed him the night of his birthday."

"I was right, this is so hot," Austin added with a grin, causing Johnny to nudge his shoulder.

"Wow, you guys kept that a secret for a while," Jude commented, dragging out the last word.

"It wasn't really a secret," Ian interjected in a knowing tone. "They were so obvious about it but none of you pay attention."

"So you knew about all this?" Jude questioned him.

"I knew because I'm awesome and not stupid," Ian retorted with a bored look.

"And you have the advantage of being Fox's best friend and he tells you everything," Ryan argued.

Josh and I made eye contact, him looking as if he was trying to figure something out.

"So all that awkwardness between the two of you before was just because you hooked up," Josh said.

"And because Fox was being an asshole," I added, causing my boyfriend to face me with an offended look.

"You guys should write a book about your love story or something," Claudia suggested in a light tone, Alex exaggeratedly nodding his head.

"You should!" Alex agreed. "Can you make my character super awesome?"

"Then it wouldn't be a true story," Ian replied in a snarky tone.

Alex narrowed his eyes at him. "You're so mean."

Fox scoffed, shaking his head. "I don't think it would be a very interesting book." I nodded in agreement. I wasn't sure anyone other than our friends were *that* interested in our lives.

"Sure it would!" Claudia said. "The romance, the *drama* . Oh, it would be great."

"Yeah, not happening," Fox denied.

Thankfully, we eventually got off the topic and moved onto talking about college.

"When are you moving Ian? A couple of weeks?" Ryan asked, the fire dying down and make it dark around us.

Ian nodded. "Five weeks."

He had decided to move in as early as the school would let him. He was going to be playing hockey for Quinnipiac after getting a good scholarship. Ian would move in early and get to know his coaches, getting familiar with the athletics program and start training.

It was a good thing for him to be able to get out of his house, but Fox was still upset he would be leaving so soon, even if he didn't show it. Fox and I were going to drive down with him and help him move in, but I knew even then Fox would have a hard time saying goodbye to his best friend.

"We have five weeks to squeeze in as much summer fun as possible then," Jude replied.

Alex had passed out in his chair, slumping over against the arm rest. Ian glanced at him and shook his head with a small smile.

"I guess we do," he said.

Small conversations continued as we let the fire die out. Fox and I stayed silent, him resting against me, turned so he could lay his head on my shoulder. I had my arms wound around his waist, pulling him close to me.

We were in a comfortable position until my phone started ringing. I moved us slightly so I could pull my phone out of my pocket. When I saw the caller ID, my breath hitched in my throat. It was an all too familiar number that showed up on the screen.

My mother had tried calling me a couple of times right after she left, but when I never answered, she eventually gave up. Until now. I hadn't given her much thought in a while.

My thumb hovered over the screen, less than an inch away from sliding to answer the call. But I stopped myself. I put my phone on silent and slid it back into my pocket with a sigh.

"Everything okay?" Fox asked, looking at me with concern in his eyes.

I smiled at him, connecting our lips in a long and loving kiss. He moved his lips slowly and expertly over mine, bringing his hand up to cup my chin. The kiss stayed slow as we continued until Fox was knocked in the head with an empty beer can.

Fox immediately pulled away to glare at Josh, whose face automatically gave away his guilt. Josh smirked at my boyfriend, practically boasting that he had thrown the can. The look on his face was enough for Fox to get up off my lap and head over to Josh.

I laughed quietly as the two of them started rough housing while Trevor tried to inch away from them to avoid getting caught in the middle of it.

I thought back to the phone call I had just received as I continued watching Josh and Fox. Months ago, I would've felt guilty for ignoring her, but tonight I felt nothing.

As I looked around at my group of friends, I realized I had all that I needed. Everything was okay, even without the love and acceptance of my mother,

because I had that love and acceptance right in front of me.

It took months but I had finally let myself trust others and be accepted by them. I stopped feeling like I was walking on thin ice with everyone, waiting for them to turn on me. I was comfortable, I was loved.

And I was finally happy.

**

THE END.

Sorry this took me so long to get out. I know for the last few chapters I was always late and I apologize for that.

I want to thank each and every one of you who has read even a word of this book. I'm so happy to be able to share my work with everyone and I'm so glad that so many of you enjoy my work. It literally makes my day reading your comments on here and on my message board, even if I don't always have the time to respond. This book was something that was in the works while I was working on Knight and I wasn't even sure I would ever post it because when I tell you I had no idea where it was going I mean, *I had no idea where this book was going* . I had plans for about up to chapter eleven and the rest I was trying really hard to figure out what to do. But I loved these characters so much so I knew I wanted to figure out *something* . The support I got from all my readers is what kept me writing this book and it's what keeps a lot of writers on here going. Writing can be really hard, especially writing a whole book, but YOU the readers are such an important part of the writing process. You keep me motivated, you make me want to keep doing better, you make me want to keep writing. So THANK YOU.

So what did you think of the Epilogue? Are there more questions you have that are unanswered (that I could potentially answer in a bonus chapter)? What about the book as a whole? What are your favorite parts? Favorite characters? Favorite memories? Final thoughts?

I did a Q&A for Knight, so if I get enough questions I'll do one for this book too (if not I'll just answer in the replies). So if you have any questions about the book, about writing in general, or anything else, you can ask them here.

I WILL be doing bonus chapters so be on the look out for those! And I will have a new book coming out soon so be on the look out for that :)

Thank you again!

Fun Facts

1. The original title to this was "Ice Kings" but I changed it literally at the last second right before I started posting it.

2. None of Fox's siblings were going to exist at first. He was going to be an only child with a bad family life.

3. I started writing this story before I had even started posting "Knight."

4. Originally, Fox and Elijah weren't going to get together until the very end of the book. I wanted this to be a very slow, slow burn.

5. At first, I was going to have Claudia be the captain of the girl's hockey team, but I thought it'd be less cliche/funnier to make her bad at skating.

6. I planned on having Elijah and Trevor hook up, and Elijah breaking his heart, but as I wrote I didn't feel like Elijah would do that.

7. I also was going to somehow make Trevor turn on Elijah/turn out to be a bad guy, but I ended up liking him too much as a nice guy.

8. I started writing this story with no idea how it was going to end which is something I typically don't do.

9. I don't know if anyone caught onto this but toward the beginning (chapter 9 or 10?) when Fox asks for donations for a teammate who needs help paying for the hotel for their away games, the donations were for Ian.

Q&A

Better late than never! Thanks for the questions and sorry it took so long for me to get to them!

jomamaGalliumYttrium

Q: Are any of the events or characters based on real life?

A: I don't remember any of the events being based on anything. The characters really weren't either, but I really wanted to have a character named Fox because I love the name, so Fox was the first character I had for the story just based off my love for the name.

Q: Does Trevor ever find a love interest?

A: I'd like to think he finds someone in college who is kind of hard around the edges but a huge softy for him (kind of like Fox). He deserves some love and I think he'll find it one day. Bonus fun fact: I almost put Trevor with Austin.

Q: Will Sam & Mason ever meet Elijah and Fox? Do you think of your ideas as you go or do you think of them all at once? And if you do plan do you deviate from the plan often?

A: I never really think of my books happening in the same universe, but I guess it's possible that Sam and Mason could meet Elijah and Fox since both stories are set around the same area. I usually have a plan in my head and have a little outline before I start writing. My ideas usually come from just one scene I really want to happen and then I write a whole story leading up to that scene which can be a bad thing or a good thing because sometimes I get to the scene and don't know where to go after that. I deviate

from the plan ALL THE TIME. Sometimes things just don't work out the way you think they will, or you get a new idea you want to work in, or the original plan just doesn't make as much sense as it did during planning. Especially when I'm trying to work through writer's block, I end up writing something that causes me to have to alter the original plan.

Q: If Fox and Elijah ever have children in the future, do you think they will continue the animal name trend? And if they do, who do you think will take it too far and throw out a ridiculous option like "zebra?"

A: I think Elijah would be all for keeping the theme! But Fox, not so much. It would probably start an argument and Fox would be like "There are no other animal names left that my family doesn't already have! Are we going to name the kid zebra?" Then Elijah would suggest a nature theme (like Rose, Lily, etc.) or something and Fox would hate the idea but they would compromise by going with Elijah's idea.

Q: Will there be any sort of Knight/On Thin Ice crossover? You never really described Elijah and Fox's specific features other than Fox's brown eyes, is there a reason for that?

A: I would never say no to a crossover because I never know when I'm going to get an idea that I like and would work out, but I haven't really given a crossover much thought. It was not really a conscious decision to not describe their features, it was more subconscious because *I* don't really like reading extensive descriptions on how the characters look. Especially since I know a lot of people like to picture the characters how they want (I do too) so I don't like to be constantly reminded, for example, that the main character has blond hair when I want him to have brown hair. That's why I like the character aesthetics at the beginning so you can get an idea of their vibe without being constantly reminded throughout the story how they look. So, it wasn't necessarily on purpose but there's a reason for it kinda?

Q: Can we see Trevor and Landon bond?

A: All I'm going to say is that I have plans for Landon.

Q: Was there a possible couple/pairing that didn't make the cut? Are there possibilities of side character stories?

A: I was going to put Trevor and Austin together toward the end because I thought they would be fun but I just didn't have the time to really put effort into that relationship. I also considered Trevor with Wren but never really planned that out. I just really wanted Trevor to have someone I guess. There is a BIG possibility of a side character story so stay tuned.

Q: Is there even the slightest possibility of a bonus chapter that looks into Landon's life?

A: I have plans for Landon! Stay tuned!

Q: How do you feel about Landon/Wren

A: All I'm going to say is I have plans.

Q: What are your thoughts on doing a spin-off for Landon?

A: I have a lot of thoughts about that.

Q: Will there be a book about Landon or Ian?

A: Not sure about Ian. I've thought about how I could do a story on Ian but don't really have anything planned.

Q: Will Susan finally accept Elijah's sexuality in the future and at least try to restore their old relationship? And will she leave her husband?

A: I'd like to think that she will somehow leave her husband and reconcile with Elijah. I truly think she loves her son, but she needs to open her mind and fix the way she thinks about homosexuality before she tries to reconcile with him. I think Elijah had begun to move on from needing his mother. He would like to have a relationship with her, but he has grown beyond needing and desiring that.

Q: What do Elijah and Fox look like?

A: Check out their character aesthetics in the cast chapter!

Q: Is it going to be Trevor/Landon or Wren/Landon?

A: All I'm going to say is that I have plans for two of the characters mentioned in this question.

Q: Do you plan on writing a book about Wren/Landon?

A: All I'm going to say is I have plans about some things.

ALL QUESTIONS ABOUT BONUS CHAPTERS

YES. THERE WILL BE BONUS CHAPTERS. I just don't have time right now but they will be there eventually.

Bonus | 01 - Fox's POV

Fox's Anthology

The Closet

"Who the hell is that?" I asked, knowing full well who that was. I knew him better than I would ever admit.

He was someone I never expected to see again; a fantasy I indulged in for one night, knowing I could never do it again. At least not for a long time.

"I think that's Josh's step brother," Ryan answered in a light tone. "Josh mentioned he'd be coming to school with us this year.

The weight of his words pounded on me like a beating.

I had slept with Josh's step brother.

The implications of this weren't lost on me. He could've told him about us, about *me* . So when I saw Josh walk up to him and say something before pointing over at us, my teeth were grinding together and my mind overly focused on what was said between them.

"We should probably go say hi," Ryan said, starting to walk over to the two of them before I pulled on the back of his shirt to stop him.

"No, we shouldn't," I quickly let out, earning myself a strange look from Ryan. "We shouldn't overwhelm the kid with a bunch of introductions."

Ryan seemed to buy my words and decided against introducing himself, instead stating that he was going off to find Jude. I kept my eyes on Elijah and Josh for a while longer. Their words together were brief, Elijah seeming to only give short answers which I knew would drive Josh up a wall.

As soon as Josh walked away, I rushed over to Elijah and quickly dragged him into the nearest janitor's closet, hoping we hadn't been seen.

His eyes were wide and his body tense as he looked at me. He seemed to relax slightly when he realized he recognized me, and his expression filled with confusion.

I grasped his shirt in my hands, bringing my face close to his. Just seeing him here put me on edge. This could ruin me if he opened his mouth about us.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I seethed, looking into his wide eyes. At first he seemed startled, but he calmed down after a few moments. His stare looking more or less annoyed than anything else.

"I go to school here?" he said, though it came out more like a question, clearly showing me that I was inconveniencing him by pulling him in here but I couldn't let myself care about that. He was the only person in this school, besides Claudia, that knew my secret. He needed to be put in his place before he could jeopardize anything for me.

I rolled my eyes. "Obviously. But why? I though you were from a few towns over?"

"I moved in with my dad," he explained as my grip tightened on the front of his shirt. Elijah backed up, trying to create some distance between us, but I didn't budge.

" *Great* ," I spat, narrowing my eyes at him as my face heated with anger. "If you tell anyone about what happened between us, I will end you."

Elijah narrowed his eyes at me, obviously getting more annoyed the longer I kept him in here spitting out threats. He couldn't possibly understand that I *had* to do this. He was the only other person at this school who knew my sexuality and I didn't trust him with it. I had to make sure he kept quiet about it. It made sense to me. I didn't expect it to make sense to him.

He shoved my shoulders, effectively distancing us. My hands were in fists at my side as his expression grew angrier.

"Chill, I'm not going to out you," he said. Unfortunately, I couldn't trust his words.

"As far as everyone in this school is concerned, we don't know each other," I asserted with a hard stare, pointing at him.

I turned and left the closet before Elijah could say anything else. The last thing I needed was to be seen leaving the closet with him and I could only hope that no one saw us go in there.

My senior year just got a lot more complicated.

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The Balcony

"Are you waiting for Elijah?" Josh asked, opening up the balcony door and sticking his head out to speak to me.

I turned in my chair to face him, my eyebrows raising as he waited for my answer.

"What?" I asked in confusion.

"He's taking a shower and we're going down for dinner," he told me, pointing his thumb back toward the room.

I shook my head. "I'm not going to dinner."

"You good?" Josh asked.

I nodded at him before turning around again to face the lights of the city in front of me. I heard the door slide shut, Josh leaving me alone on the balcony.

My capacity for socialization was burning out for the day. It was exhausting being surrounded by my teammates for hours on end. It was exhausting being around Elijah. His presence stressed me out. Although that wasn't his fault, I couldn't help but resent him for it.

The sound of the sliding door opening and shutting caught my attention, but I didn't turn around. Whoever stepped outside didn't say anything for a few moments.

"Aren't you coming to dinner?" Elijah asked from behind me.

"No," was all I replied, keeping my eyes forward.

I just wanted to be left alone for a little while, but of course, Elijah had to ruin that as he sat down in the chair beside mine.

"You can leave now," I spat, sending a nasty glare his way.

"I still don't understand why you have such a huge problem with me," Elijah spat, returning a matching glare.

My eyes narrowed as I stared back at him. I didn't have a problem with *him* exactly, it was more the way he made me feel. He made me on-edge, like he could spill my deepest secret at any time. I didn't like that he made me feel so vulnerable. The feeling wasn't one I was used to and it made me feel weak.

"I don't have a problem with you," I plainly replied.

"That's bullshit."

I didn't bother answering him. He could think what he wanted for all I cared.

Elijah sent me an irritated look before standing up from the chair and heading back to the balcony door. I looked back out at the city, willing him to leave the balcony faster so I could have some peace.

"Uh... Fox?" Elijah trailed, causing me to let out a sigh.

"What?" I snapped, turning my head toward him.

"The door won't open."

I instantly stood up from my chair and pushed Elijah away from the door, tugging on it as hard as I could and willing it to open. I pulled and pulled like I would somehow be able to tear open the jammed door with my strength alone.

"Call Josh," I snapped at Elijah, who was just standing off to the side and watching me.

I pulled on the door again, knowing it was no use. Elijah was one of the last people on the planet I wanted to be stuck out here with, no matter how attractive I found him. It wasn't like I could act on it. The least he could do was call Josh.

"Um, can you call Josh?" he asked me, his voice quiet and timid.

"My phone is inside charging. Just call him," I replied, looking inside through the balcony door.

"My phone is inside."

I slowly turned to face him, the heat of my anger flowing through my veins. My stomach dropped in a panic as my eyes widened at the boy standing in front of me. The frightened look on his face told me that he was being completely serious.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I hissed, pulling on my hair in frustration. "This would have happened if you didn't come out here!"

"Don't blame this on me," he said in an argumentative tone. "How was I supposed to know the door wouldn't open?"

Every logical part of me knew he was right. It wasn't his fault the door was stuck, or that we were stuck out here together. But that didn't stop me from being absolutely pissed off.

"You shouldn't have even come out here," I argued.

"Yeah, then you'd be stuck out here by yourself."

"I'd rather be stuck out here alone than with you," I spat, returning to my seat and crossing my arms over my chest.

"That makes it sound like you have a problem with me," Elijah retorted, reclaiming his seat beside me.

I just shook my head at that, letting out a frustrated sigh as I scowled over at him.

"You know I would never out you right?" Elijah asked after a few moments of silence, his expression serious. "Like no matter how you treat me, I won't do it."

His words instantly made me feel guilty and I let my scowl fall. All this pent up hatred I had for him was based off the fact that he knew something about me that I didn't want anyone knowing. And here he was, telling me that the reason I hated and distanced myself from him was never going to happen. It did little to calm my nerves, but I could feel his sincerity through his gaze.

"Do you regret it?" I quietly asked, almost quiet enough where I didn't hear myself.

"Regret what?"

"Coming out," I said. "You've had to take a ton of shit for it." Some from me.

He took a moment to answer before shaking his head and looking out at the city in front of us.

"No."

"Seriously?" I wondered, my voice louder this time, sounding more like myself.

I watched him as he crossed his legs in front of him before moving his gaze back to my waiting expression.

"I mean, it sucks sometimes, having everyone know," he continued, clearing his throat. "But it was tiring hiding that part of me. I couldn't do it anymore. Even if it meant losing everything, it was worth it."

The boy across from me was a lot stronger than I had originally given him credit for. He had much more to lose than I did by coming out, yet he did it and lived by it. It took guts.

The piercing wind blew against my skin, leaving a harsh bite of wind across my cheeks. I pulled my jacket closer to me and looked over at Elijah who sat in his chair with short sleeves, rubbing his hands up his arms to generate warmth against the harsh autumn air.

Before I could stop myself, I was standing up and snaking my arms out of my jacket, then throwing it toward Elijah. I had to do something to keep the guy warm, it would be pinned on me if he ended up freezing to death.

I would be lying if I said I didn't view this as an olive branch. I had given him hell before, and now we were hopefully turning the page.

"Thanks," he said as I sat back in my seat.

He smiled lightly down at the jacket as he zipped it up and the sight sent an indescribable feeling down my spine.

"I'm sorry for what I said the other day," I said suddenly before I could bite my tongue. "I know you don't have it easy."

"It's alright." He sent me that damn smile that made me feel happy and guilty at the same time.

"And I'm sorry for treating you like shit since you got here," I continued with a sigh. The look on his face just kept making me feel bad for being such an ass. My throat dried at the amount of apologizing I was doing. It wasn't something I was used to doing.

"What's with the change of heart?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"I don't know," I admitted. I couldn't figure out why I suddenly started feeling so guilty. "Maybe I just realize that you have enough shit to deal with without me making it any worse. I'm supposed to be the captain and that means for looking out for all of you."

Elijah's smile got wider at my confession.

"Does this mean we can be friends?" he asked teasingly.

I scoffed. "Friends?"

Elijah just nodded at me, waiting for an answer.

"I'll think about it," I responded to which I was met with an irritated look.

Though, I knew it wouldn't take much thought.

***

The Decision

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I paced my room, my fingers pulling roughly at my hair.

I fumbled with my phone, tapping on Ian's name and impatiently waiting for him to answer. I placed my hand on my hip and looked up at the ceiling.

"Hello?" Ian finally answered.

"I need you to come over," I rushed out, biting the inside of my cheek. I had never felt so uneasy.

"Are you serious, Fox?" he asked. "I literally just got home. What the fuck."

"I did something that was possibly very stupid," I told him, starting to pace the room again.

Ian let out a long sigh before agreeing to come over.

Kissing Elijah had been something I wanted to do for a while now, I just didn't expect it to happen the way it did. It was rash and sudden and it could have just ruined any chance I had with Elijah.

I wasn't one to get worked up about things like this, but when it involved Elijah, I couldn't control the way I reacted. I couldn't bring myself to sit down as I waited for Ian to arrive.

The kiss replayed in my head. The fluttering in my stomach I had never felt before tonight came back as I thought back on the memory. I would have been reveling in the feeling if I hadn't thought I just possibly fucked up my relationship with Elijah.

"What the fuck is so important that you had to force me to come over here?" Ian asked as he barged into my room, and expectant look on his face as he let the door slam shut.

"I fucked up," I admitted to him, finally allowing myself to fall down onto my bed.

I laid back and covered my face with my hands.

"What exactly did you fuck up?" Ian asked, standing over me. "I didn't come over here for you to be vague as shit."

I pulled my hands away from my face to give him a glare. Before I called Ian over here, I hadn't thought about the fact that he had no idea about any of my history with Elijah. I was just freaking out and needed someone to talk to.

Now that he was here, I wasn't sure I was ready to fully open up about this. But Ian's impatient expression told me I had no choice if I didn't want him to end up punching me in the face. I had to make the decision to tell him.

"I kissed Elijah," I muttered, looking away from him and up at the ceiling once again.

I didn't want to see his reaction. Ian stayed silent for a few moments and then sat next to me on the bed. The two of us stayed in silence for a little while longer but I could feel the heat of Ian's stare every second of it.

"Are you going to elaborate or what?" he finally spoke up.

I turned my head to meet his eyes.

"You kissed him and..." Ian trailed, gesturing for me to continue.

I groaned and sat up to face him completely.

"I kissed him and he probably hates me now," I continued, crossing my arms over my chest.

He gave me a strange look. "Why the fuck would he hate you for kissing him?"

I raised my eyebrows, narrowing my eyes and looking at him as if he was crazy.

"Why wouldn't he?" I asked. "I could have just ruined our friendship!"

Ian rolled his eyes and smacked me in the shoulder.

"Well why did you kiss him if you didn't want to ruin your friendship?"

"What the fuck does that even mean?"

Ian let out a frustrated groan and shook his head at me.

"You don't kiss someone you want to be just friends with," he explained with a knowing look.

I let out a huff and covered my face with my hands again.

"What if I'm just like Trevor to him?" I mumbled, my words muffled by my hands.

The thought had occurred to me just after I had left Elijah's house. I could just be another guy that had fallen for him like he wasn't already used to that.

Ian chuckled. "You're so dumb."

I pulled my hands away from my face to shove him with a scowl on my face.

"I'm gonna be honest, I think he likes you," Ian told me, holding his hands out in front of him like he was preventing me from shoving him again. "I wasn't going to say anything because I didn't know how you'd feel about it."

"How I'd feel about it?"

"Fox, I literally didn't know you were into dudes until right now," Ian replied.

Right. I called my friend to vent to him and I hadn't even told him I was gay.

"I'm gay," I told him.

"Glad that's cleared up," Ian sarcastically responded. "So you're into Elijah but you think he hates you?"

"I just sort of kissed him while we were arguing," I confessed with a light flush on my cheeks. "It was a stupid way to do it. I basically threw myself at him."

Ian laughed at me and my eyes settled on his face in a glare.

"Always so graceful," Ian chuckled. "Did he just find out you're gay when you kissed him?"

I let a smirk creep onto my face at Ian's question and he looked at me with wide eyes.

"You told him before me," Ian accused, giving me a hard shove. I could tell he wasn't actually angry with me, but the thought annoyed him.

"I didn't technically tell him."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

The grin on my face widened. "We hooked up over the summer. Before I knew he was Josh's step brother."

"Honestly, I'm not even surprised," he replied with a sigh. "The sexual tension between you two is palpable."

I scoffed. "No, it's not."

"You're such an idiot. You've literally had sex with the dude and you think he's going to hate you over some kiss?"

"It's not just a kiss, Ian," I tried to reason, giving him a serious look. "A kiss like that is not like trying to hook up. It had feelings and shit."

"Feelings from you or feelings from him?"

I took a moment to think. "Both maybe? Maybe just me? I like him, Ian."

Ian rolled his eyes. "I'm telling you, I think he has a thing for you. Just by how he is around you."

"What if he doesn't though?"

"Just talk to him and be your confident, asshole self," Ian said in an almost monotone voice. "I'm sure he'll swoon."

"You're the asshole," I told him.

Ian laughed and let his usual hard expression fall as he nudged my side with his elbow.

"So how did you two end up hooking up?"

I let out a loud laugh. "You're not going to believe me."

**

Welcome to the first bonus chapter! As you can see this is all snippets of Fox's POV and I hope it's not confusing about what the scene is.

****I'm going to continue Fox's Anthology in the second bonus chapter with more snippets of scenes that take place after the events of the book, so be on the look out for that!****

Sorry it took me so long to get out!

Bonus | 02 - Fox's POV

Fox's Anthology

The Lake

Elijah spun around on the ice like he was in his own winter wonderland, laughing with glee as he glanced around at our surroundings. The ice at our feet looked like crystals while the setting sun made everything around us glow. Elijah's smile beamed like he was glowing himself.

"Doesn't this look so cool?" Elijah asked, staring up at the sky.

He looked so content, in a beautiful bliss. I had never seen him so at ease, the tension he usually carried having vanished as soon as he laid eyes on the lake.

Happiness looked good on him, and seeing him like that made butterflies erupt in my stomach. I wanted to see him like this all the time. So beautiful and happy and serene.

"Yeah, it's cool," I agreed, clearing my throat and trying to push my thoughts to the back of my mind.

Elijah turned his gaze to me with an unreadable expression, yet still looked peaceful beyond words. He slowly skated backwards until Alex came up to us with his loud voice.

"One of you race me," Alex commanded, looking as if he was about two seconds away from passing out and needing to be carried back to the hotel. It wasn't about to be me who carried him.

"You look like you're about to fall over," Elijah told him.

"Yet he'd still beat you in a race," I couldn't stop myself from saying. No matter how much I enjoyed to look at Elijah, and no matter how his beauty

made me feel inside, I couldn't keep myself from poking fun.

Elijah narrowed his eyes at me, and he still looked as endearing as ever.

"I'm *not* slow," he said.

"Both of you race me then!" Alex exclaimed.

I was about to deny him before Elijah nodded in agreement and allowed Alex to lead us over to the rest of the group. It felt like I followed Elijah like a lost puppy. And if any of the guys knew what was going on with us, they'd think the same.

We had competed in two races, me being the victor in both of them, even with Elijah trying to pull me down. His laughs as he fell and slid on the ice were enough to send the flutters in my stomach again. I chuckled at him, placing my hand on my chest as I slid over to where he laid on his back, and leaned over him.

"Are you okay?" I asked, not able to stop myself from laughing.

"I would've won," he said which only caused me to laugh harder and offer him my hand.

"Sure you would've," I replied as I pulled him up to his feet.

Once his hand was in mine, it was hard to let go of. I wanted to keep it and keep him warm, but the others were around. I mentally cursed at myself for caring what they thought about us. I wanted to hold onto Elijah's hand and not worry about what anyone had to say about it. It was stupid, really, thinking anyone would judge me for holding hands with him. I let go of him and my hand was icy cold once again.

I smiled slightly at him, his cheeks rosy and his deep breaths clouding above him, and gestured for him to follow me. We skated side by side and I watched him, not able to take my eyes off his face.

The way he looked while we were out here, the calmness, the happiness, the utter joy, made me realize just how much I wanted him. I had known since

the start of this, since I kissed him on his birthday, that I wouldn't be able to keep myself from wanting more. And I knew I couldn't ask him to date me in the closet just so I had a better chance at being respected in my hockey career.

The thing about it was that I didn't even know if hockey was what I wanted for a career, or what the odds were that I'd actually make it into the pros. What I did know is that it wouldn't feel half as good making it if I had to hide who I was while I did it. And I would feel happier without having any regrets and without missing out on what I wanted in the present.

I kept my gaze on him as he skated before I stopped him.

"Hey," I said, and he stopped, raising his eyebrows at me.

I let out a heavy breath, a cloud of breath forming between us before quickly disappearing into the air. I skated closer to him, trying to swallow down all my nerves. I was closer to him now than friends should be.

"Would it be bad if I kissed you right now?" I asked, my tone quiet and hushed like I was still scared of someone overhearing us. But I wasn't. At least I thought I wasn't anyway.

Elijah stared at me with a look of shock, his breath catching in his throat.

"Everyone would see," he reminded me, a serious expression on his face. I could appreciate his reminder that if we did this, there was no going back. And after seeing him today, seeing him in front of me right now, I knew I was okay with that.

I nodded. "I know."

Elijah let out a shaky breath, but I forced myself to keep mine even. I didn't want any apprehension to show. I didn't want him convincing me not to do this.

"Would it be bad?" I repeated.

"If you're not ready for it," he replied. "If it would make you hate me."

"It won't," I answered instantly.

There was nothing in this world that would make me hate him, that I was sure of.

"But are you ready for it?

I paused and took a deep breath, looking into Elijah's eyes for any indication that *he* didn't want this. All I saw was desire.

I nodded. "I am. I want to."

"Then it wouldn't be bad."

That was all he had to say for me to cup his face in my hands. My hands were burning as they held his cheeks. My lips over his started out slow and unsure. The kiss was soft and filled with care as my lips caressed his. I wanted to show him how serious I was, how I felt about him, and how his happiness made me feel. His kiss was heating up my face. It made me feel safe, warm, and cared for.

I pulled away for a moment, looking to see how he was feeling. I searched his eyes again for any indication of wanting to stop, but I didn't see it, so I leaned in and kissed him again.

He kissed me harder this time, showing me his own feelings and making me feel as safe as I wanted him to feel with me. With him, I was blissfully ignorant to our teammates who were most definitely staring at us at this moment. At that point I didn't care. All I cared about was Elijah, his lips on mine, and the way we made each other feel.

We eventually pulled away, my posture rigid as I felt numerous stares on my back. Elijah peeked around my shoulder, a tight lipped smile on his face before he patted my shoulder and looked at me.

"You have to face them," he told me softly.

"I think I'll just stay here," I said. No part of me wanted to turn and see their stairs, their looks of judgement. I had to compose myself and put on my

usual demeanor to not only protect myself, but Elijah as well.

"No," Elijah denied.

I sighed, turning around with a glare before I could talk myself out of it. They all looked at me with wide eyes, besides Ian and Josh. I set the hardest glare I could on them and grabbed onto Elijah's hand, partially for my own comfort but also to assure him I wouldn't run from him.

"What?" I snapped at the team, tightening my grip on Elijah's hand. Their initial shock seemed to wear away, and none of them were dumb enough to start talking. Except Alex.

"Uh..." Alex trailed, his eyes stuck on mine and Elijah's hands.

"What Alex?" I snapped again, causing him to flinch and his eyes to fly to my face.

"N-nothing, I'm just—"

"Just what?"

"Surprised?"

I shot him an unamused scowl before sending the same look to the rest of the team. I knew Alex didn't mean anything by it, but I was already in defensive mode and there was no getting me out of it once I was already there.

"We just didn't expect that," Ryan said in an even, calm tone, almost like he kind of did expect it.

"Okay," I replied with a shrug. I still held onto Elijah's hand as I pulled him with me off the ice, wanting to shield him from all the stares. I yelled back to the team that it was time to go back to the hotel for dinner just before stepping off the ice with Elijah beside me.

"Are you okay?" Elijah asked as we pulled our skates off and switched them with our sneakers.

"I'm fine," I assured him, kissing his forehead because now I could without worrying if anyone saw.

Because now that didn't matter. There was a weight that was lifted off my shoulders now that the team knew about us. It was something I didn't have to hide anymore. And something I couldn't let myself be ashamed of.

Elijah grabbed onto my hand once we were both ready to go back to the hotel and the rest of the team followed behind us.

His hand in mine felt natural, like it belonged and I was cruel for waiting so long to take it in mine. As we walked, all I did was hope that I'd be able to see Elijah how he was tonight all the time.

***

Summer before freshman year of college

"You really need to cut your fucking hair," Ian's rude voice sounded through the room as I lounged back on the couch, my hair a mess on the top of my head. He shoved my feet off the couch and took the spot beside me.

"I know. I have an appointment tomorrow," I said before fixing a teasing smirk on my lips. "But just a trim. Elijah likes to tug on it."

Ian shot me a disgusted look as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm going to be stuck in a car with you two for two hours next week and I do not want to hear anything about that," he said in a sharp tone. "I mean it. I will throw myself out of the car."

I tried not to think about the fact that it was only a week until we would be dropping Ian off at school. I knew it was the best for him to move away as soon as possible, but still, I would miss him.

"No you won't," I replied. "You love us."

Ian's eyes narrowed. "I'm not kidding. I'm not listening to you two flirt the whole way down there, or talk about how he tugs on your hair or your

tendency to hook up in cars."

"That was only one—"

"No, it wasn't," Ian cut me off with a knowing look. "Don't act like nobody noticed you two sneak off to the car while we were at the beach last week."

My eyes widened. "We didn't have sex in the car."

We may have done some other things, but it wasn't that.

"Whatever, I don't care," Ian said, sounding as if he didn't believe me. "I just don't want to see it. Or hear it."

"We'll wait until the ride home."

"You better," Ian muttered. "Where even is Elijah?"

"He's out with Trevor," I replied. "He's supposed to be dropping him off and coming here."

Although neither of us would admit it out loud, Elijah and I spent a little *too* much time together and it had gotten to the point where I missed him even though I had just saw him the night before. We needed time away from each other to spend with our own friends, but it just so happened we had most of the same friends. So while he was out with Trevor, I was anxiously waiting his return.

I checked the time on my phone and noticed that it was past the time Elijah said he would be at my house, and there was no text or call from him telling me he would be late.

"He should actually be here by now..." I trailed, looking down at my phone in confusion before finding his contact and calling him.

It only took a moment for Elijah to answer, him breathing heavily and sounding frustrated.

"Hello?" Elijah answered.

"Where are you?" I asked him, sharing a look with Ian.

"I'm over in the center of town," he said with a sigh. "I got in an accident and—"

"You *what* ?" I cut him off in a sharp tone. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

I stood up from the couch, Ian looking at me in confusion before standing up with me and following me toward the door.

"I'm fine," Elijah said with a heavy sigh. "I'm just waiting for the tow truck at this point."

"You should go to the hospital!" I nearly shouted, leaving through the front door with Ian following closely behind me. "Why didn't you call me?"

"One of the paramedics already looked at me. I'm fine," he repeated and sounded as if he was trying hard not to sound annoyed. "And I didn't call you because I was busy and there's nothing you can do about it and I knew I'd see you eventually."

I snapped my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose, letting out a frustrated groan.

"You should have called me. Where are you?"

"You do not need to come here."

It took all my willpower to not scream at him over the phone.

"Fine, don't tell me. You're sharing your location with me anyway," I said before hanging up.

Elijah had started sharing his location with me a couple weeks ago when he went out to some club with the GSA group and was worried about them getting kidnapped. He never stopped sharing it and I never even looked at it until now.

"So what's going on?" Ian asked, sounding slightly amused as he looked over at me, leaning against my car.

I shot him a look of annoyance.

"Elijah got into an accident," I told him. "I'm going to go pick him up."

"He got into a car accident and you were yelling at him over the phone?" Ian asked with an incredulous look. "I'm surprised he hasn't dumped your ass. Seriously."

"Shut up," I snapped, opening the driver's side door. "I wasn't yelling at him. I was just expressing my worry. Loudly."

Ian shook his head, making his way to the passenger's side. "You're such an asshole."

I ignored him as I backed out of the driveway and started my way toward Elijah. It didn't take me long to find him considering the large tow truck on the side of the road with Elijah's car. I pulled up to the curb and hurried over to Elijah who was sitting down on the sidewalk.

He held a napkin up to his lip that I assumed was bleeding and there was a cut on his cheek. Those appeared to be his only injuries. Elijah rolled his eyes when he saw me approaching.

"You didn't need to come here," he said as I sat down beside him and grabbed the napkin from his hand to get a better look at his cut.

I dabbed the napkin on his lip, causing him to flinch away from me.

"You said you were fine," I replied in an accusing tone.

"I am fine."

I shook my head at him, holding the napkin against his bleeding lip while looking at the cut on his face.

"You're bleeding."

"Barely."

"Hey, you're fine, get up," Ian called out, looking down as he stood in front of us.

"See?" Elijah said, holding his hand out for Ian to hoist him up. Ian pulled him up off the sidewalk and the two of them looked down at me with impatient expressions.

"God forbid I worry about you," I muttered, standing up myself. "I'll make sure to never do it again."

"Perfect," Elijah replied, looping his arm through mine.

"How did you even crash?" I asked him, looking back toward his car on the back of the truck. It didn't look too bad, but the front bumper was smashed and bent inward.

Elijah pursed his lips, looking sheepish with a tint in his cheeks.

"I... uh, I was coming up to the red light..." he trailed, sounding embarrassed. "And you know I tend to, like, brake really late."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I know."

"So I was braking, kinda close to the guy in front of me, and I *sneezed* and the next thing I know, I'm hitting the car in front of me."

Ian let out a loud laugh from in front of us, throwing his head back.

"Why didn't you let Trevor drive you?" I demanded, shaking my head. "At least he's more careful."

"He drives like my Grandpa!" Elijah exclaimed.

"And you can't drive at all!" I shot back, Ian still laughing ahead of us. "I knew it was only a matter of time before you crashed into something."

Elijah roughly shoved his elbow into my ribs.

"You get in *one* accident and people think you can't drive," Elijah said in an exaggerated tone.

"I've always known you're a bad driver," I pointed out, rubbing where he hit my ribs and then grabbing his hand into mine.

Elijah grumbled something under his breath that I couldn't hear.

And all I could do was laugh and plant a kiss on his cheek, grateful his mishap hadn't gotten him seriously hurt.

***

One Week Later

Alex was already close to being drunk before the party even started.

Ryan had suggested having a going away party for Ian as soon as we found out he was moving to school in the middle of the summer. Everyone else was on board but I was reluctant. Part of me tried to convince myself that it was just because I thought it was stupid, but the other part knew that it just made Ian leaving all too real. And I didn't want to admit that I was going to miss him, though Elijah had already called me out on that.

I sat alone on the couch while the others set everything up. The party wasn't going to be huge. It was just between our group of friends, but Ryan wanted to make it a surprise for Ian.

As I sat alone, staring off into space, Elijah plopped down next to me and pulled my arm around him.

"I know you're sad," he said. "But try to be a little happy when Ian gets here."

"I'm not sad," I denied, and Elijah shot me a knowing look. He always knew when I was lying.

"Then I'd hate to see how you look when you're actually sad," he replied.

"I just think this whole thing is stupid," I muttered with a huff, crossing my arms over his chest. "It's just an excuse to get drunk, not to say bye to Ian."

"That's not true," Elijah denied, shaking his head before a look of contemplation landed on his face. "Well, maybe it's a little true, but it doesn't have to be that way for you. Or me."

I just made a grumbling sound that caused Elijah to squeeze further into my side.

"You don't have to admit you're going to miss him to me," Elijah continued. "But you should tell him that. He's your best friend."

I scoffed. "We don't say that shit to each other."

"So you're just going to mope around and be all broody?"

"You like when I'm broody."

"I've never said that."

"You don't have to," I told him, a slow grin sprouting on my lips, my first real smile of the day. "I can tell."

Elijah squinted at me before resting his head on my shoulder. I pulled him closer, securing my arm around him and watched as Ryan and Josh tried to get Alex off the table he was standing on and Jude and Liam were fiddling with Ryan's speaker. Everyone was too preoccupied to realize that Ian had made his way into Ryan's basement, standing at the bottom of the stairs with a confused yet annoyed look on his face.

"What the fuck are you guys doing?" he asked, stepping closer to the couch and catching everyone's attention.

"You're not supposed to be here yet!" Ryan exclaimed. "Who was in charge of keeping tabs on Ian?"

"Alex," Josh said with a glare fixed on the boy on the table.

"Why would we trust Alex with something like that?" Ryan asked in frustration. "Well, surprise I guess."

"I'm still not understanding what the surprise is," Ian responded, sitting next to Elijah on the couch.

"It's a going away party!" Alex yelled, jumping down from the table and stumbling a bit as he swayed over to where Ian sat and took the spot beside him.

He sat uncomfortably close to Ian, much to Ian's dismay. Ian had a frown on his face as Alex cozied up to his side and threw an arm around him.

"I'm going to miss you so much," Alex said, looking like he was about to cry and he hugged Ian to his side.

Ian slowly turned his head toward me, a look of bewilderment on his face as I shrugged.

"Their idea, not mine," I told him in a bored tone, receiving a nudge in the ribs from Elijah.

"You guys act like I'm moving across the country," Ian said with an eye roll, Alex still hugging him at his side. "I'm gonna be, like, two hours away."

"Two hours too many!" Alex dramatically cried.

Ian looked like he was two seconds away from shoving Alex off of him, but he never did.

It wasn't until later in the night I was finally alone with Ian. Well, somewhat alone. Elijah snored in the backseat of my car as I pulled out of Ryan's driveway and started toward Ian's house. The two of us hadn't spoken much all night. He was too busy laughing at Alex trying to master some TikTok dance and I was too busy brooding on the couch.

"So have you packed all your shit?" I asked him, clearing my throat.

Ian hummed in agreement. "I don't have much shit to pack."

I nodded and tapped my finger on the steering wheel.

Elijah always knew how to read me. I couldn't figure out if he just knew me *that* well or if I was only open and vulnerable with him. It could have been a combination of both. But he was right about me being sad about Ian leaving. And, of course, he was right about me having to tell him that.

"Look, I know we don't get all teary eyed with each other or whatever," I started, "but I'm going to miss you."

I caught Ian's look of discomfort out of the corner of my eye. He crossed his arms over his chest and turned his head to face me. And from the look on his face I could tell he felt the same way. Neither of us were soft with one another. It was more like we angrily and aggressively showed our love for each other, but almost never through softness or kind words.

"Don't make me feel fucking guilty," he said.

"I'm not trying to make you feel guilty."

"I need to get out of here," Ian said and I knew exactly what he meant. He needed to get out of his house and far away from his mother.

"I know that."

"I've been, like, trying to convince myself to just wait until fall to move in like everyone else," he said in a rushed tone. "But I just can't."

"I don't want you to," I told him. "I just said I'm gonna miss you, not that I hate you for leaving or that I don't understand why you are."

"I know, it's just—" he cut himself off with a heavy sigh. "I'm going to miss you too," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" I grinned.

He shot me an icy glare. "Don't fucking make me say that again. You heard me."

We were silent for a few moments, the only noise being the low music from the radio and Elijah's snores from the backseat.

"Don't you dare tell him this, but maybe I'll miss Alex a little too," Ian added. "And his stupidity."

I laughed. "And Elijah?"

"Maybe."

The rest of the ride was filled with Elijah's snores and our emotions hanging in the air.

**

Hi everyone! Welcome to the second part of Fox's Anthology. I had a couple more scenes to add to this one but I decided that I'm just going to add them to a third bonus because this one had already gotten so long and it has been so long since I posted the first bonus. Also, I meant to have The Lake be part of the first one but I forgot about it so there it is.

****There will be a third bonus that continues in Fox's POV of scenes that take place after the events of On Thin Ice so be on the look out!****

Let me know what you think!

Bonus | 03 - Fox's POV

Fox's Anthology

Two Days Later

It had only been half an hour into the car ride down to Quinnipiac and Ian was already complaining about "third wheeling" with Elijah and me.

"Ian, I let you have the front seat. You can't complain," Elijah commented from behind us.

"I had to take the front seat so you wouldn't suck Fox's dick while he's driving and get us killed," Ian retorted.

"I can still do that from back here," Elijah pointed out.

"I wouldn't oppose," I said.

Ian groaned and covered his eyes with his hand, leaning his head against the window.

"You two must actually hate me," he grumbled.

I briefly looked at Elijah through the rear view mirror and the two of us shared a grin.

"You love us," Elijah said, Ian grumbling under his breath as he leaned his head against the window.

Ian was just irritable because he was nervous about moving into school, not that he would ever admit that. I just knew, being his best friend and all. I knew he would miss me, just as I would miss him, even though he was acting like he wanted to throw himself out of my moving vehicle.

We drove for another half an hour before I had to stop at the rest area. The three of us got out to use the bathroom, then Elijah went into the store to buy some snacks while Ian and I went back to the car.

"Why are you in such a bad mood?" I asked Ian when the two of us were alone.

"I'm always like this," he replied with a blank stare. I really couldn't argue with that.

"You seem moodier than usual."

"You seem less moody than usual. Are you happy to be getting rid of me?"

I glared at him. "Shut up."

Elijah got back to the car a moment later, sliding into the back seat.

"I got us pringles and cookies and waters," he said, holding up the bag of snacks.

Then we were back on the road again.

When we finally arrived at Quinnipiac, there was barely anybody there. I dropped Ian off outside the housing office so he could get his room key and then we were off to find his room.

Ian was going to be sharing a suite with some of the other hockey players on his team, but he was the only one moving in early, so he would have the place to himself until the end of August. The suite was a decent size for a college dorm. There was a common area and a small kitchen area and two bathrooms. Around the common areas were the bedrooms.

The room was as big as to be expected for a dorm room. There was a bed on each side and I immediately chose the one on the left or Ian.

"What if I wanted the other one?" he asked me.

"Well, do you?"

"I don't give a shit."

We started unpacking his things which wasn't a lot. Ian didn't bring much with him, just his clothes, hockey things, and a few other items. It didn't take us long to get everything unpacked. When we were done, it felt too soon and I didn't want to leave just yet. I hated the thought of leaving Ian here all by himself. I was dreading it the moment I said I would drive him here.

"Do you want us to take you to the store to get anything else you need?" I asked him, trying to prolong us staying here without him knowing.

"I don't need anything else," Ian replied, not looking at me.

"You don't need food?"

"There are stores on campus and dining is open," he said.

"Extra sheets?"

"Fox." He glared at me. The two of us were glaring at each other, and I hadn't notice Elijah had made his way toward the door.

"I'm going to use the bathroom," he said before rushing out of the room.

"Seriously, why are you being like this?" I asked him as soon as Elijah was gone.

"Me? You're the one acting like a mother dropping her child off at school," he snapped. "I don't need you to fucking baby me, Fox."

"I'm not babying you!" I exclaimed. "I'm just trying to make sure you have everything you need!"

"What you're *trying* to do is delay the inevitable," Ian replied, clearly seeing right through me. "I'm good here. You don't have to try and stay here for hours."

I nodded. "I'll visit you again before I have to move in for school."

"Okay."

And then Elijah was back in the room. We only stayed for a little while longer before I couldn't think of any more excuses for us to stay. Surprisingly, Ian let me hug him goodbye, and then we left.

Elijah could tell I was tense on the drive back. He reassuringly placed his hand on my thigh.

"He's going to be okay, Foxy."

I knew that.

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The Party

Fall Semester, Freshman year of college

I had lost sight of Elijah a while ago, but the alcohol coursing through my system put that at the back of my mind. There were too many of us cramped into this room, bodies pushing up against me. I was playing beer pong with a few of m teammates until we started doing so badly we had to walk away. Now I was stuck between a group of people, drink in my hand and barely able to stand up right.

"Ridley!" someone shouted out. I couldn't tell who it was at first. He pushed through the crowd and put his arm around my shoulder. "Are you up for another round of pong?"

It was Tanner, a friend of one of my teammates who had made it obvious the moment I met him that he was interested in me. He had made sure to let me know that he was bisexual just as I had made sure to tell him that I had a boyfriend, though that didn't seem to deter him.

"I can't even throw the ball straight," I slurred, leaning against him.

He chuckled. "So I guess that's a no go then?"

I nodded.

"That's fine. I didn't really want to play anyway," Tanner said, keeping his arm around my shoulder.

I didn't even think about how this would look to others to see us like this, close and embracing. Or how it would look to Elijah if he were to see. He already wasn't a fan of Tanner, and this would make him angry.

"Your boy isn't here?" Tanner asked, leaning closer to me to talk into my ear.

I looked around and there was no sight of Elijah.

"I don't know where he went," I said. "He was here." Was he? I didn't even know anymore. My head was spinning, my mind in shambles.

"And he left you?" Tanner asked, raising his eyebrows. "Like this? That's not very good of him. Let's go sit down."

I wanted to tell him to shut up, to not talk about Elijah like that, but then we started moving and I had to focus on trying not to throw up everywhere which wasn't easy.

The two of us eventually ended up on a chair together, sitting too close for comfort. Tanner had gotten me a water and himself another drink. He had his arm around the back of the chair behind me as he spoke to his friends who were around us. I groaned and leaned my head back on his arm.

I wanted Elijah. I wanted him to take me back to my room and lie down in bed with me while I slept off all this alcohol. I wanted to play with his hair, lay his head on my chest. I felt miserable without him.

"Elijah," I groaned, leaning my head on Tanner's shoulder. Or was this Elijah's shoulder? I didn't know whose shoulder it was anymore. All I knew is my head hurt and I wanted to lie down.

I thought I might have fallen asleep until I heard Elijah's voice before me. And he didn't sound happy.

"Let's go," he said in a clipped tone. I opened my eyes and looked up at him, my head still on Tanner's shoulder.

"Elijah," I said.

"Let's go, Fox," he replied, glaring over at Tanner.

"Don't worry, Elijah," Tanner said with a grin. "I took good care of your boy for you."

"I'm sure you did," he said in a snide tone.

"If he doesn't want to go, I can make sure he gets back to his dorm tonight."

Even in my drunken state, I knew that would piss Elijah off.

"Do I look like a fucking idiot to you?" Elijah snapped. He grabbed onto my wrist and pulled me up off the couch. My stomach turned at the movement, but I luckily didn't throw up.

"Calm down, Elijah," Tanner defended. "I'm just trying to help."

"I'm sure you are," he sarcastically replied before pulling me through the crowd and out of the room.

Once we were out in the hall, Elijah let go of my wrist and walked in front of me. I could barely even walk straight, let alone keep up with him.

"Elijah," I called out. "Elijah, wait."

He sighed but slowed down anyway, waiting for me to catch up. He let me put my arm around him to hold myself up and we continued our way back to my dorm.

We were silent the whole walk there. When we finally arrived, he dug his hand through my pocket to find my key then unlocked the door.

Elijah didn't speak as he went through my closet to find me a change of clothes. He still didn't say a word as he undressed and redressed me and put

me in bed on my side. I expected him to climb into bed with me like he usually did on the weekends, but he pulled out my desk chair and sat down.

"Elijah?"

"What?" he asked, glancing over at me.

"Are you going to come to bed?"

He sighed. "No, Fox, I'm not. I'm going to make sure you're not going to drown in your own vomit and then I'm going to leave."

"Why?"

He shook his head at me. "Maybe because you left me alone at a party at *your* school where the only people I know are you and your friends, got drunk out of your mind, and by the time I found you, you were cuddled up with Tanner."

"You're mad at me?" I asked in confusion.

"Yes, Fox, I'm mad at you," he replied. "Now go to sleep."

"I can't sleep if you're mad at me."

"Yes, you can."

Elijah got up from the chair and turned off the light. I had moved onto my back, so he came back to the bed and put me on my side before sitting down on the chair. And then I eventually fell asleep.

By the time I woke up, Elijah was gone. He had left me a water and pain relievers on the nightstand. I barely remembered what had happened the night before, but I did know my boyfriend was angry with me and I couldn't have that.

"Shit, fuck," I groaned as I sat up. My head felt like I had been slamming it into a wall and my stomach still didn't feel like I would be able to hold anything down.

Despite the pain I was in, I got out of bed and got ready for the day. I was an asshole who needed to go profusely apologize to my boyfriend, hangover be damned.

I stopped by the breakfast spot we frequented and got Elijah his favorite breakfast sandwich and coffee before making my way toward his dorm which was only about a ten minute walk from mine. I got into the building as someone else was leaving and made my way up to his room, silently hoping his roommate wouldn't be there to witness me grovel.

Elijah opened the door after I knocked on it. He looked at me like he was fully expecting it to be me on the other side of the door, like he knew this was what he would be faced with in the morning.

"Hi," I said sheepishly. "Brought you breakfast. Is Freddie in?" I asked, referencing his roommate.

"No, he didn't come back last night," Elijah answered, moving to the side so I could walk in the room. He took the coffee and sandwich from my hand and sat down at his desk to eat it.

"Look," I started after standing in silence for a few moments. "I know I was a complete dick last night."

"Yeah, you were," he agreed, sipping on his coffee.

"I don't remember everything, but I'm sorry," I continued. "I get it if you're still mad and you want me to go, but I wanted to come apologize."

"You left me alone to go play beer pong, got trashed, and then cuddled up with Tanner on a chair that was not big enough for the both of you," Elijah replied, raising his eyebrows.

"That fucker took advantage of me," I hissed.

Elijah's eyes widened with concern and the sandwich he was holding fell from his hands.

"What?"

"Not like that," I rushed out, realizing what he had thought my words meant. "I just meant that he took advantage of the situation. I was drunk, barely knowing where I was, and he swooped in to make me rely on him. I wasn't- I barely even knew it was him when I was lying on him. I wasn't trying to cuddle up with him."

Elijah sighed. "Yeah, I know. I was pissed about you leaving me and then I was even more pissed when I saw you with him. I just hate him. And I hated seeing you with him."

I smiled down at him. "Were you jealous, Elijah?"

He glared at me. "Shut the fuck up. I haven't even accepted your apology and you're saying dumb shit like that."

I laughed, knowing just by looking at him that he wasn't mad anymore.

"It's okay if you were jealous," I said. "You know I'm the jealous type."

"Enough," he said.

"Just admit it," I teased.

"I was not jealous."

"You were."

"Get out."

I laughed again and sat down on his lap, the chair creaking under our weight.

"I really don't think this can hold both of us," Elijah said with a grin.

I placed my mouth on his, smiling against his lips. I pulled back slightly, our lips still almost touching.

"I still love you even though you were jealous. You should know I'd never go for Tanner."

He shoved my face away from his. "Shut up!"

At that point my hangover was forgotten about, and I stayed with Elijah all day.

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Sick Day

January, Freshman year of college

I was miserable. My throat was sore, I was congested, I kept coughing, and I had a headache just as bad as a hangover. And worse than all that, I had seen the team doctor and now I wasn't allowed at hockey practice until I was better. My own roommate was staying with another one of our teammates because he didn't want to catch whatever I had.

I hated being sick. I hated missing hockey. And I really hated being confined to this room.

There was a knock on the door and as soon as I opened it, Elijah was on the other side, holding the back of his hand up to my forehead.

"Foxy, you're burning up," he said with a look of concern. "Come on. Back to bed."

He came into the room and shut the door behind him, ushering me toward the bed. It wasn't until I was back in bed that I noticed he had a bag with him. He started emptying its contents onto my desk.

"I'm fine," I told him and he shot me a look of disbelief.

"You literally sound like shit," he said, staring at me. "But it's fine. I'm here to take care of you."

"I'm not that sick. It's just a little cold."

"Stop being so stubborn," he retorted. "Don't you want me to dote on you?"

As a matter of fact that did sound nice. But Elijah was right. I was stubborn.

"I don't need you to though," I told him. "You don't need to waste your time and I don't want to get you sick."

"This is not a waste of my time," he said.

I suddenly got into a coughing fit and Elijah looked at me with sympathy. Once I had stopped, he gave me a water bottle and a handful of cough drops.

"Let me take care of you," Elijah demanded. He knew I would give in, that I couldn't say no to him despite the fact that I was stubborn and didn't want him seeing me like this.

Elijah came over to the bed and tucked the blanket around me, propping me up against my pillows before shoving a thermometer in my mouth. He waited a few moments before checking my temperature.

"You still have a fever," he said. "But it has gone down from what you told me before."

He turned back to my desk where he had laid everything out that he brought over. He took a container of soup and put it in my microwave and then heated up water in my electric kettle.

"I brought you some soup and tea," he told me.

When the soup was done heating, he brought it over to the bed, but instead of handing it to me, he took a spoonful and blew on it before holding it out for me.

"Elijah," I complained. "I can feed myself."

"I told you to stop being stubborn."

I narrowed my eyes but took the spoonful of soup he was feeding me anyway. I was miserable and irritable. I should have been glad Elijah was here to dote on me, but it did nothing to brighten my mood.

Elijah continued to feed me the soup, ignoring my grumbling. When I was done he poured me the tea, allowing me to drink it on my own. I had eventually fallen asleep, though I didn't know when. Elijah was working on some homework at my desk when I woke up. He must have heard me because he looked back at me the moment I moved.

"How long did I sleep?" I asked, my voice groggy.

"Only about an hour," he said, closing his laptop. "Do you want more soup?"

I shook my head before he stood up from my desk and came over to the bed, checking my temperature with the back of his hand on my forehead.

"Come get in the shower," he said. "You're all sweaty."

I groaned, throwing my arm over my eyes. " *Elijah* ."

"I'll get in with you."

I removed my arm from my face and looked over at him, making sure he wasn't bullshitting me. He looked serious, and suddenly I wanted to take a shower. Elijah helped me out of the bed and brought me to the bathroom. He helped me undress, and even though I could do it myself, I just let him do it for me.

Once we were both undressed, he started the shower and we got in when the water warmed up. The steam from the water was already helping clear my sinuses.

Elijah ran his hands through my hair, getting it wet before putting shampoo in it. He looked so concentrated that I couldn't stop him even though part of me hated being taken care of like this. But it was Elijah, so that made it okay.

After shampooing and conditioning my hair, he rinsed it out and started with the soap. Elijah lathered soap all over my body. He rubbed it into my chest, then bent down and got my legs.

"Are you going to let me soap you up?" I asked, looking down at him.

Elijah looked up and grinned. "If you want."

He stood up and I gave him the same treatment he gave me, and when we were done, Elijah turned the water off and pulled a towel around my body then his. The two of us rushed back into my room where we continued to dry off and get dressed.

"Back in bed," Elijah demanded, but this time he climbed in after me. He brought his arm around me and rested my head on his chest, putting his head on top of mine.

"You know, you're probably going to get sick from me."

"That's fine. Then you can take care of me."

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The Hockey Game

Hockey season, Freshman year of college, Boston University vs. Northeastern

I knew there would come a time that I had to play against Elijah again, but this was the first time I was playing against him as my boyfriend and my teammates wouldn't let me forget about it. They brought it up every chance they could, reminding me that I couldn't go easy on him, that I couldn't throw the game, that I couldn't sit out. It was annoying and made me more irritable than usual.

"Are you ready for this, Ridley?" asked one of my teammates, Johnson, throwing his arm around my shoulder."You know, none of us are going to go easy on your boy."

I glared at him and shoved him away from me.

"I know. It's almost like you've all been saying that for a week straight."

Johnson shrugged, laughing at me. "Just have to make sure you know. We have to pull out a win. They've been unstoppable this season."

That was another thing that was getting my team riled up about playing Elijah's; they were one of the best teams in the division this season. That instantly put a target on their back and made everyone want to play their hardest against them, no distractions and no going easy. And no matter how many times I told my teammates that playing against Elijah wasn't going to change the way I played at all, they didn't believe me. I didn't even know if I believed myself.

I told myself that I could separate my relationship from this game, but I wasn't too sure I could. I was pretty sure my coach's plan was just to keep me off the ice when Elijah was on the ice, and that was alright with me.

By the time the game rolled around, nobody was talking about Elijah, which I was grateful for.

Elijah was out on the ice for puck drop while I was on the bench. I tried not to focus on him too much, and I was doing a good job of it until he sent me a text right before the game.

From: Elijah
Good luck<3 love you

I hadn't even gotten the chance to respond like I wanted to because then I was being pulled by one of my teammates to go down the tunnel and onto the bench.

Boston University, Elijah's team, won the opening face off. The first line center of his team had one of the best face off percentages in the division, so it didn't come as much of a surprise that he won it. Early on in the game, my team, Northeastern, got called for a tripping penalty.

Elijah was on the first power play unit and I was sent out for the penalty kill after he had gotten off the ice. Luckily, we were able to kill the penalty and get back to five on five. We ended the period with a 0-0 score and went back into the locker room for the intermission.

Coach talked to us about doing better in the face off circle, which was really fucking difficult when you were facing off against one of the best in the league. We had spent so much time on face offs in practice just to prepare for this and it felt like it didn't help at all. We were still losing almost all of them.

It wasn't until the second period that I ended up on the ice at the same time as Elijah. He had skillfully blocked my shot on goal which resulted in BU getting the puck. It was always hard for me to score when Elijah was playing defense against me. When we did scrimmages and drills in high school, he barely let anything get by him. He was just really good, and even though he blocked my shot, my heart swelled with pride.

Johnson clapped me on the shoulder when I got back to the bench.

"You had a wide open net!" he exclaimed.

I took a drink of water, keeping my eyes focused on the game.

"He blocked it."

"How convenient that your *boyfriend* blocked your shot," he replied with a scoff.

"Shut the fuck up," I said. "How about you go out there and score?"

And then he did just that. Johnson was out on the ice and Elijah had just stolen the puck from one of our guys. Johnson went right for it. He checked Elijah into the boards, pinning him there for a moment as they fought for the puck. He eventually got it, turned around and headed toward the net. It was a stupid goal. It just trickled in, the goalie unable to hold onto it.

I didn't say anything to Johnson when he got back to the bench. He just wanted to get a reaction out of me, and if I showed him a reaction, he would just go after Elijah more to get another one.

At the end of the second period, the score was 1-1. It wasn't until close to the end of the third period that I was on the ice with Elijah again. At this

point the game had gotten more aggressive, both teams wanting to be the next one to score and win.

I battled with Elijah for the puck, which he eventually won. I could hear my teammates yelling at me from the bench, which only pissed me off. I followed Elijah, determined to get the puck back, and slammed into him once I caught up. He was always slower than me on the ice. But I didn't realize how fast I was going, so when I collided with him, I knocked him down and into the boards. And then got called for a penalty for it.

"Shit," I cursed. His teammates came over and started shoving me, but I just pushed them away and went back to Elijah.

"What the fuck, Fox?" he asked, looking back at me.

I reached down and pulled him up off the ice.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "I'm sorry."

I didn't get to hear his response before the ref pulled me away and directed me toward the penalty box.

There was not much worse than getting a penalty late in the third period. It put your team at a disadvantage with not much time to make up for it if things went wrong, which of course they did. One of Elijah's teammates scored with thirty seconds left on the penalty. I exited the box and got glares from my teammates as I reached the bench.

"How are you going to get a penalty on your own boyfriend?" one of them, Anderson, asked.

"They probably planned it out like that," Johnson added.

"Shut up," Anderson snapped. "No they didn't."

Unfortunately, we weren't able to score in the last few minutes of the period, and Boston University won the game. I tried to care more about that fact that we lost, but I couldn't.

I went to find Elijah once we were dismissed from the locker room. He was already waiting for me outside, arms crossed over his chest and eyebrows raised. His hair was still damp from his shower and his cheeks were flushed from the cold.

"I'm sorry," I said instantly, holding my arms out for him.

Elijah stepped into my arms, hitting me in the stomach before leaning into me and wrapping his arms around my waist.

"You hit me so hard," he said, amusement in his voice.

"I really didn't mean to."

"Did you really have to tackle me?"

"Again, I didn't mean to."

Elijah laughed and the two of us made our way back to his dorm room, arms still wrapped around each other.

**

It's been a while but FINALLY, here's another bonus chapter.

Let me know your thoughts :)